

"The Church Reformed, Always Being Reformed" We've Got This!

May 17, 2020 ~ Presbyterian Heritage Sunday

Luke 4: 16-20 ~ Ephesians 3:14-20 ~ Romans 12:1-5

FPC: *Rooted and Grounded in Love*

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction to theme:

Did you hear me say that today is Presbyterian Heritage Sunday? Yes, today is the day for us to remember, reflect and rejoice in our Presbyterian spiritual roots and grounding. Today invites us to see what we can learn from our long and rich history as Presbyterians, and as FPC Marshfield.

Why this Sunday, May 17? We trace the beginning of the Presbyterian Church in the USA to May 21, 1789 when the first General Assembly convened in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Those folks had immigrated from Scotland, where John Knox planted the Presbyterianism he had learned from John Calvin in Geneva, Switzerland. It is through those two firebrand theologians that we trace our particular root system back to the Protestant Reformation first set ablaze by Martin Luther in 1517. Peel back that name, Protestant Reformation, that has become dusty and domesticated over time, and we find two verbs, two action words: "protest" and "reform." Yes, at the core of our tradition is God's call to protest when institutions we love are failing us, and to reform or change, as God leads us forward into the light of Christ's universal love and justice.

It was only 89 years after the first General Assembly in Philadelphia, that *our* First Presbyterian Church here in Marshfield began: on November 27, 1878. This was only six years after the city of Marshfield was first settled. In a moment, I invite you to let the sound of our bagpipe introit, that begins on the grass in front of the building that was our church from 1924-2003, connect your heart to our Scottish, Protestant, Reformed heritage, as we give thanks for our nearly 142 years of being the Body of Christ right here in Marshfield.

Especially today, as we seek God's help, hope and clarity in the midst of the Coronavirus Pandemic, our heritage reminds us this is not the first time we have been knocked off course or challenged by calamity. Taking the long view, all the way back to our Old Testament roots, we see the larger arc of defeats, conquests, and captivity, that our forebearers found their way through. And brighter still, we see the power of the Risen Christ shining through, pointing us forward into a new and better day.

Introduction to Second Scripture Lessons

I have selected two brief scriptures for our "Second Lesson" that speak to the essence of what Christ call us to be and do as a church seeking to fulfil the mission he proclaimed in his first sermon in Nazareth, according to Luke. I will be reading these lessons from the very Bible that was snatched out of our church and saved in the 1923 fire, ignited by a chemist who was giving a lecture demonstration for an "Adult Forum." As the story goes, it ignited nearby greenery decorating the church for Christmas and all went up in flames so quickly, everyone ran to escape the blaze. No one was hurt and fortunately someone thought to grab this Bible on their way out.

Sermon:

On April 15, 2018, we had to cancel church because of a blizzard. I hated doing that, but the timing of the major dump of snow forced our hand. That was my first winter here in Wisconsin. I then learned this was FPC's traditional first winter initiation for their new pastors. Pastor Kevin had to cancel church for snow one Sunday his first winter here. So, good! Done with that. But then my second winter it happened again on Sunday February 24, 2019: snow and icy drifts stopped us in our tracks: no church that day, either. This year, 2020, I thought we dodged a bullet because we had no Sunday morning blizzards to deal with all winter long.

A Sunday morning without church seemed so wrong and strange. A rare unfortunate anomaly. But then we plowed and shoveled and moved on. This year of 2020 we didn't cancel for a single blizzard, instead there came COVID. And it has shut us down since March 22. It has already been nine Sundays including Holy Week and Easter. Still we are without a vaccine, or comprehensive reliable testing and contact tracing to protect us against this new and unknown virus from which none of us is immune. Therefore, the risk of worshipping together remains high. Too high.

Michael Osterholm, an infectious disease specialist at the University of Minnesota,ⁱ has employed the blizzard metaphor to help us understand the scope of this pandemic. He explains, that COVID is not like a blizzard, where you hunker down for a few days and then things get back to normal. Hadn't we all hoped it would be something like that? We are Wisconsinites, so we know how to do blizzards. Nor is it like the season winter, that lasts much longer than a blizzard, but as this week's spring warmth with its glorious flowering and greening of the trees reminds us us: winter can be long. But it is just one season that ends in due time--sometimes not until late May or June, but it does end. We are Wisconsinites, so we know how to do winter—even long winters that some of us truly enjoy. Instead, Dr. Osterholm compares the coronavirus pandemic to a "little ice age" that will last likely 12 – 18 months and result in a once-in-a-lifetime change that is likely to affect all our lives and organizations for years. Including the church.

Here's my good news for us about his "Little Ice Age" analogy. We are FPC Marshfield Presbyterians, so we *double-got this!* I will start with the Presbyterian part. As Presbyterians, we stake our whole way of being church, on the Protestant Reformation belief, "*the church reformed and always being reformed.*" Reformed by whom? By the love of Christ working in and through us, changing us for the good of our souls, for the good of one another and all of creation. Change (whether we like it or not) is what Christ calls us to every day. As Presbyterians, we've been getting ready for this "new little ice age" our whole lives. We just didn't know it.

Now for the FPC Marshfield part. Since 1878, when our church was first formed with 15 members, of four different denominations (yes, we welcomed diversity from the start) we have weathered variety of major calamities in our 142 years of being FPC, that have forged and formed us into the Body of Christ we are today: steady in a storm, learning from each upending challenge, as God leads us into a deeper faith and new kinds of action. Looking back at our history of being "rooted and grounded in love" through almost a century and a half, we see how God has called us to make changes that fulfill Christ's mandate in Luke 4:16-21. Here are three examples from our FPC story.

Being Rooted and Grounded in Love is why

- In 1992, three women in our church began the Marshfield Area Food Pantry in order to feed the hungry in our neighborhood not being served at the time. Two years later, they added the clothing ministry, and in 1997 Cheryl Lewis-Hartyl became the Director of what turned into Soup or Socks and has continued to grow in its scope of service and outreach into the immediate and surrounding areas. Since COVID, SOS has been distributing 150 boxes of food every week.

Being Rooted and Grounded in Love is why

- In 2017 the Green Team was born when our DNA that lives and breathes stewardship, respond to the cry of mother earth. We have been an Earth Care Congregation for over a decade, led by an energetic team of folks including persons from Faith Lutheran and beyond, educating and advocating in ways small and large to be faithful to this call.

Being Rooted and Grounded in Love is why

- When three families from Mexico came to our doors one Sunday seeking a Presbyterian Church, we welcomed them in. And then they enriched our lives beyond description. They also helped to open our eyes to the amazing gifts and challenging realities that our undocumented neighbors face. In response, our Immigration Action Team took root and germinated. Its work continues to evolve, this past year focusing on the need to combat the sin of separating children from their parents at the southern border, with the REUNIR bracelet project. Just yesterday the Immigration Action Team responded to the current COVID crisis by organizing a “Free Basic Basket,” distributing bags of food, books and hygiene supplies to 120 families, primarily our Hispanic neighbors who are not eligible for the aid being distributed by our government.

As your former Pastor, Virgil E. Taylor, wrote on the occasion of our 100-year anniversary in 1978, “The real history of a church is not seen in lists, pictures of members, or brief written history. Rather it is seen in the warmth & love, the dedication and courage, the struggle and sacrifice, and the commitment to Jesus Christ of all who have been a part of this congregation.” In light of this gospel truth, and our reformation belief in “the priesthood of all believers” I am going to let four of our now 302 “priests” who have been a part of our congregation for several years, share their own “Expressions of faith”: Shirley Forbish, Nadene Lautenschlager, Mark Borchardt, and Barb Gillespie. Their words and prayers will complete the proclamation to all of us on this Presbyterian Heritage Sunday.

Tom & Shirley Forbish

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. John 3:16

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. Psalm 23:1

We believe our faith and Christianity is a way of life. The love we have for Jesus Christ has transformed us and moved us to serve God and our fellow man.

Tom and I have been members of First Presbyterian Church for more than fifty year, joining as newlyweds. Our children, Mark and Jan, were baptized and confirmed in the church. During our membership we have served as Sunday School teacher, elder, deacon, and church secretary.

Adversity and loss have touched our family in the past and our faith in God has always been a comfort for us in those times. The church family has surrounded us with support, care and prayer in our time of need. We are blessed to be members of a church that has played such an important role in our community. First Presbyterian Church is a spiritual leader and has consistently reached out to help those in need.

Prayer: Lord, you are our shepherd. Calm us and lead us through all our days to come. You gently direct us through days that are difficult and provide for us a community that is filled with compassion. Continue to guide us and grant us your peace. Amen.

Nadene Lautenschlager

A few years ago, I read a story about a minister who was asked by one of his parishioners, who was dying, if the minister would put a fork in her hand when she was in her casket after her death. He had thought this a strange request until she offered that she had participated in many church potlucks and dinners after which the ladies clearing the plates would request that everyone keep their forks for the dessert which was about to be served. She had always equated keeping her fork with “the best is yet to come,” and wanted those at her funeral to realize that for her the best had come.

Each Sunday we have a sharing of joys and concerns during which inevitably, someone reports being touched by either a friend or family member being seriously ill. Although it makes us all sad for those facing the challenges, the prayers of the congregation will hopefully make the journey for the individual involved be a little less scary and will help the family/friends feel a little less alone. Support of friends in the congregation nearly eight years ago made the death of my sister more bearable and we felt that support again a little over two years ago and just a few weeks ago when my husband lost first his mother, and my very good friend, and then his father. Only faith that “the best is yet to come” for us and has come for our loved ones make this loss bearable. Deaths of my mother, sister and in-laws, as well as the fact that my father and step mother may also leave us in the not too distant future, has made me realize just how mortal I am and how much I appreciate my faith in God, as I can honestly say I believe, “the best is yet to come.”

Prayer: Lord, when the challenges of life seem overwhelming, help us remember you are there for us, have always been and always will be. If we trust in you and have faith you will be there with us, the challenges and journeys we will experience will be much less difficult and much more of an interesting/exciting adventure. Keep us in your loving hands help us to “let go – let God.” Amen.

Mark Borchardt

For now we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 1 Corinthians 13:9-10

As a practicing scientist, I am reminded daily of the line between the known and the unknown and the limits of human knowledge. Pushing against the knowledge line, making it bulge a tiny bit using one human construct, science, has only strengthened my faith in God. In a field that works constantly to explain the world, I have learned to accept the unexplainable.

The phrase goes, “God is love.” In my faith, God is love and more. God is everything. Not just omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient, but *omnis*, the ALL. Transcending time and space, cause and effect, existence and nonexistence. God is beyond our understanding, and yet, by simple experiences, like coming together in worship or helping a neighbor in need, we can sense God’s presence.

I am grateful to First Presbyterian Church for giving my family every opportunity to feel God’s presence. Worship service, plays, music, SOS, Adult Forum, Outreach, Blast, TNT, the entire life of the church has enriched our life in Marshfield. While I must work to eke out a little scientific knowledge, one thing I know with confidence and ease: First Presbyterian is an incredible faith community.

Prayer: Gracious God of ALL, thank you for your gift of faith that allows me to follow you into the unknown. I ask you to give me confidence in you daily. Help me to trust you and eagerly anticipate the life you have for me. Guide me as I share your faithfulness with others today, and bring me to the day when we will meet face to face. In the strong name of Jesus. Amen.

Barb Gillespie

He has told you what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness; and to walk humbly with your God. Micah 6:8

Faith is a journey, which matures through the seasons of one’s life. We’ve all heard this message before, but I have come to understand it more in the last few years. Once I retired from teaching, I had more time for learning. As an educator, I was focusing on my students’ needs, and trying to keep up with the demands of my classroom. As a retiree, I could begin to refocus my energies on the social justice issues of our world, which have always meant a lot to me, but for which I could devote little time.

At First Presbyterian, I am continuously offered opportunities to learn about and become involved in God’s work, following the inclusive mission of Jesus Christ, welcoming one and all to worship and work together. I learn best from others, and the growing numbers of church family members and friends at FPC serve as great teachers for me, demonstrating in contemporary times how to feed the hungry, seek justice for the oppressed, welcome the stranger, support the downtrodden and care for creation.

I believe that the Spirit calls us to not only profess belief in, but to work passionately for justice and peace in the world. First Presbyterian Church invites all of us to step onto the path of our faith journey, and to move ahead at whatever pace is comfortable for us in our season of life. I

am privileged to walk beside, and sometimes run to keep up with, others in our church family as we joyously share the hope of the Gospel in the world.

Prayer: *Lord, please provide me with the wisdom and strength I need each day, to learn how to live out your will for me. Amen.*

Friends, this is a time of great possibility. As we look ahead, let us look together to discover what redemptive possibilities are emerging. We will see that best by staying rooted and grounded in Love, forever seeking unity in all through all. To God be the glory. Amen.

ⁱ <https://journal.praxislabs.org/leading-beyond-the-blizzard-why-every-organization-is-now-a-startup-b7f32fb278ff>