

## THIS IS OUR STORY...

Hebrews 11: 8-16 / Hebrews 11: 32-12: 2

### 1) “The Next Chapter”

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It’s been said that, “every picture tells a story” and indeed, it does. Take, for example, this photo...

This morning, I would like to suggest that, in a similar fashion, every congregation has a story. Whether it may realize it or not, every congregation has a narrative that provides an awareness of who they are, an understanding of why they are and a sense of the direction they are going. This story is one that provides a congregation with its sense of identity as a people.

This morning, I would like to invite you to think about our story—about where we have been, where we currently are and where we are going as a people of faith. This is an appropriate time to do this as this summer has marked our 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a congregation. It was sixty years ago in July that a handful of adults and children from the First Methodist Church in Walnut Creek started a new congregation in Danville—in the Funeral Home on Front Street to be more precise.

From that rather intriguing beginning, our congregation has flourished. With strong pastoral leadership and a visionary group of lay people, the San Ramon Valley United Methodist Church has built, over the years, a beautiful campus and created a dynamic ministry that continues to touch the lives of people as it invites them to live out their faith in personal, practical and service oriented ways.

As we look back, this morning, on the past sixty years of our existence, there is much to be grateful for and much to be proud of. We are a people who are doing their best to live by the United Methodist motto: Open minds, open hearts and open doors. We might even be tempted to add, “Open hands” as well.

The fact is that we take the word, “open” seriously as we attempt to translate our experience of faith into the expression of our living. Open means refusing to close ourselves off from the liberating love of God’s Spirit that insists upon the grace of acceptance and inclusion and the justice of compassion and service. Open means refusing to fall into the trap of believing that we have all the answers or that our way is the only way. Open means refusing to think that we have already arrived at our destination of the journey of faith.

Instead, we see ourselves as a people “on the way,” a people who often have more questions than answers, a people who, by the grace of God, are very much “in process” as we struggle to respond to the challenges of living.

While we have a right to feel a certain satisfaction over some of the things that we have been able to accomplish, we also recognize that it would be, not only be detrimental, but deadly to assume that we have reached our intended destination and that there are no more questions to ask or problems to solve.

Our story, as rich as it is, is far from complete. While the “plot line” of the gospel’s “good news” has unfolded within our congregation in some exciting and even transforming ways, we recognize, this morning, that this plot line continues to unfold and that our story is still being written. So it is that I invite you to both **celebrate** and **anticipate**.

As we consider the story that has been written over the last sixty years, there is so much to **celebrate**. And yet, as we think about the next sixty years and all that God will yet do in and through us, there is, likewise, much to **anticipate**.

**In looking at our lesson from the Book of Hebrews this morning, this is precisely what we find—a celebration of all that has been and an anticipation of all that will yet be.**

The writer proudly provides a great roll call of faith in which he lifts up the names of those who have given noble and faithful witness over the centuries. From Noah and Abraham to David and Samuel, the writer reminds his readers of their rich heritage of faith and the courage and sacrifice of the men and women, boys and girls that has enabled it to stand the test of time.

It is, says the writer, these saints of their past that have formed what he calls, “a great cloud of witnesses” who now surround them in their present moment of time, offering their encouragement and support as they “run with perseverance the race that has been set before them.”

So it is that we have reason this morning to celebrate the saints who have gone on before us in pouring the foundation of our church—the foundation that we are now building upon. It is because of them and their witness of faith that we are who we are and have, before us, the opportunity to continue on with the work that they have begun. Thanks be to God for the mighty “cloud of witnesses” that even now surround us and cheer us on.

Yet, even as we celebrate all that they have done and all that we are currently doing, let us anticipate what will yet be—that is, the “new thing” that God is doing.

And I want you to know, this morning, that God is indeed, doing a new thing. I hope that you won’t miss it. I hope that you won’t be so pre-occupied with “business as usual,” that you fail to see and sense the ways in which God is already at work, creating the framework for a new way of being in ministry—a new way of connecting with our community and inviting the transformation that God’s Spirit makes possible.

This afternoon, we will dedicate our new gymnasium—the ARC. This, of course, is a very significant moment in the life of our congregation. For not only does it represent the culmination of the efforts that began over five years ago to make this dream a reality, but it

also represents what I believe is new opportunity to re-define ourselves: to redefine who we are and what our ministry is essentially all about.

There's a slogan that has been circulating through the United Methodist Church that challenges us to **"Re-invent Church!"**

As I think about that message, it is not only a good idea, but it is an absolutely essential idea. If the Church is to be relevant, if it is to address the reality of life as we know it in the year 2017, then we must do more than merely **re-decorate** by rearranging the our comfortable furniture. We must **renovate** by discarding the furniture and the structures that will no longer fit with the floor plan of our future!

It was almost exactly 500 years ago that Martin Luther recognized the need for the Church to re-invent itself and so he nailed his 95 thesis on the door of the Church at Wittenberg and thus began the Reformation that would bring dramatic and much needed change to our world. In a similar fashion, we too must be willing to re-invent ourselves—preferably a bit more often than once every 500 years!

As we think about our own church in this present moment of time, it is clear that the ARC provides us with a marvelous opportunity to do that. As we are all well aware, our culture has changed rather dramatically over the past twenty to thirty years. At one point in the distant past, church's occupied a place of important and prominence on the city square. Now, they often have to fight for the right to build a new building within any residential area. In the eyes of some (and now a few), the church is no longer relevant and no longer needed in our contemporary culture.

This attitude, of course, is reflected in the explosion of Sunday morning sports and activities that now go "head to head" with church services and their once sacred hold on the hours between nine and noon. Those days are no longer as we find ourselves having to continually bumping up against the "competition" of various sports programs. And no matter how much we might choose to complain about this reality, it simply is not going to revert back to the way it was. The genie is out of the bottle.

Given this emerging cultural reality, it seems to me that there is a choice that looms before us. We can either continue to complain about how secular culture with its focus on sports is "taking over," or, we can re-invent ourselves and our attitudes toward this reality by recognizing the opportunity that we have to use the medium of sports and recreation as a tool with which we can build a new connection, a new relationship with the culture that surrounds us.

To be perfectly honest, I can't think of a better way to do that than to build a ministry of recreation, a ministry that uses our new gymnasium as a spring board for re-establishing our connection with the community outside of our doors—a community that, otherwise, might be tempted to ignore us all together. I felt the possibility of that connection on the very first day of our very first basketball camp. As the children we getting warmed up on the court before the camp began, I sat in the stands and made small talk with some of the

parents who had stayed to watch the proceedings. It was remarkable how open they were and how appreciative they were of what we were trying to do. When the camp was over, I received a nice note from one of the Dad's and his son who had participated in our values driven basketball instruction. They were both grateful for our efforts and wanted me to know of their gratitude.

And that was just the first week! Those conversations and that note reminded me of the great potential for relationship and community building that our recreational ministry holds. I can't image a better opportunity to make that connection than the one that this generous gifts makes possible. It opens up a doorway into a future in which we can become connected and invested in our community in a way that we never could have imagined.

So this is indeed, a Sunday to celebrate the foundation that has been poured by the cloud of witnesses who even now surround us as we continue moving forward on the road of faith. We celebrate their vision and their passion to make that vision our current reality. To use our story metaphor of the morning, it has been a good and indeed, engaging read.

But our story isn't over and it isn't even winding down. In fact, I trust that, in many ways, it is about to move to a new and higher level of interest and engagement. It's quite possible that we are just getting started with a whole new way of understanding ourselves and the opportunities we have to share the good news—and, I might add, the needed news—of our faith. Even as we celebrate the witness of our past, we can also anticipate the possibilities of our future in the ministry that we are, even now, creating.

It is, I think, an exciting time to be the Church...and an exciting time to get in on the work that God's Spirit is already doing. I hope that you won't miss it because opportunities like this one don't come along very often. Like every organization and every congregation, we have a story to share. It's a story about the ways in which God has been at work in our past and the ways in which God will continue to be at work in our future. It's a story that has, in part, been written by the lives of those who have gone on before us, that great cloud of witnesses that even now surrounds us. But it is also a story that is yet unfolding, a story that is still being written by those of us who have chosen to band together on our present journey of faith.

As we celebrate our past, this morning, we also anticipate our future and the next chapter of ministry that we will write together in the ministries that we create and in the community that we build. God has blessed us in more ways than we can count and yet, we know that this blessing is meant to be shared with the community of which we are a part. We have been blessed in order to be a blessing. Amen.