

“What Is Needed to Build Us Up”

Psalm 130, Ephesians 4:25-5:2

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A woman was enjoying the sun on a beach in Florida when a little boy in his swimming suit came up and asked her, “Do you believe in God?” She was surprised by the question but she replied, “Yes, I do.” Then he asked her: “Do you go to church?” Again, her answer was “Yes!” He then asked, “Do you ever read your Bible or pray?” Again she said, “Yes!” By now she was really curious. The little guy sighed with relief and said, “Good, will you hold my quarter while I go swimming?” That little boy had a whole list of questions before he was willing to **trust the woman**. I know this is just a joke for fun, but what if this is our story? Do you think that you are able to identify yourself as a trustworthy Christian like the woman in this story? Do we believe that our church, Fair Oaks United Methodist Church, is a trustworthy ‘church’ to our neighborhood? From our perspective, we do, but what about the neighbors’ opinions? What about our denomination, United Methodist Church, in this society and the world?

This morning, I would like to talk about church as a responsible, trustworthy faith community to our neighborhood. Then, what is really needed to build us up as ‘a good church’ to ourselves and to our community? The development of Protestant churches, especially Presbyterian, and Methodist churches is significant in the history of the United States. A German religion sociologist, Max Weber (1864-1920), in his book, “*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905)” argues that Calvinist ethics and ideas influenced the development of capitalism in our country: The Calvinist or ‘predestination’ theology states that God has already chosen our destiny after life, but we don’t know whether we are saved or not. So Presbyterians believe that earthly success was a visible token of God’s grace. This attitude developed pietism, work ethics and source of capitalism in the United States. Yes, in early Methodism in the United States, there were those Methodists who had faith in the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, but the Methodists were more active, passionate and enthusiastic people who led our society towards salvation in grace. The Methodists were known as spiritually passionate, but also regarded as honest and trustworthy people for doing good works. John Wesley said in one of his documents (in the Declaration of August 9, 1771) in which he emphasized that he who performed no good works was not a true believer. Whereas Presbyterians believe ‘doing good works’ has nothing to do with our salvation,

but as a gift of grace from God, we Methodists believe this is an important part of God's salvation and God's grace. The Methodists emphasize 'sanctifying grace' for both individual and social holiness as a part of grace for our salvation. So the Methodists believed that we were more responsible for transforming the world into a better society through our efforts and dedication. Methodism made a great contribution to the founding and the spirit of democracy. Methodists established many educational, social and charitable organizations.

Let's revisit our Scripture readings. The first Old Testament reading, Psalm 130, shows us our petitions to God. The Israelites were in trouble and faced difficult times in their daily lives. They desperately cried and prayed to God saying, "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Hear my voice! Please let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplication! I wait for you, my soul waits in hope." But I believe that this is not only honest confession of ancient people over two thousands years ago, it is also the same confession of our broken hearts to God. "Lord, hear our prayers! We couldn't find any hope in us, our hope is in you!" We often pretend that we are confident, strong and fearless in all circumstances. On the other hand, we are anxious, vulnerable and afraid of our life when we have to face difficult times. Here's an example of anxiety that was very real. One night, as a chaplain, I got a call from the oncology unit. There was a patient who was brought into the emergency room with pneumonia. When he got better, he asked for a chaplain's visit. Since he had been fighting lung cancer, he was very anxious and afraid of pneumonia. When I entered his room during the night, there was only a dim light in a dark and quiet room. The patient was wearing an oxygen mask to breathe in and out. As soon as he saw me, he held my hands, crying to say, "I don't want to die." I saw his desperate heart in his tears. I asked him what made him afraid to die. He took a pause and started to talk about his feelings. He was concerned about his family, worries after he died. It seemed that he found some inner peace while he shared with me.

There is not only fear of death, but we also live in a world surrounded by many anxieties such as an unpredictable future, worries about health, fear of losing job and anxiety about getting old. There are other worries around us that discourage us and weaken our souls and hearts everyday. We don't want to live our lives as a slave to these feeling of anxiety. If someone asks me to summarize my Christian faith in short sentences, I would say this: "Take heart. Don't be afraid. God is with you." Christians are encouragers to the discouraged, bringing hope to those who are in great despair. Rekindle the light when darkness dominates our lives. God is our hope that we can rely on when we are anxious, nervous and fearful.

Our second scripture reading shows us things that we should offer to our

faith community. Apostle Paul advises us to deepen our Christian faith. If you were to answer what you would want to be an example of your Christian faith, what would be on your list? Recently, our church is ‘building up’ something new in our church campus. Are you noticing that something is going on? Let me share with you what is happening:

- Building a brand new church sign.
- Resurfacing our parking lots including extension of the side parking lot (disabled parking lot).
- Building a new audio/video projector system in the sanctuary.
- We have launched a new web site and we are planning a new format of worship bulletin soon.
- More long term visions to extend our narthex area building new decks outside next year.

What is the purpose of doing and building up these activities? This ‘Face Lift’ project is not a cosmetic make-up activity to satisfy our desires, but we wish to make a fresh start for God’s mission. Our church mission is to spread love, and we grow and bear the fruits to serve others. In our history, Methodists were recognized as honest, trustworthy, faithful and good people for both business and life relationships. But in these days, we are losing our good reputation from people and society. Apostle Paul made suggestions to the Ephesians congregation in his letter. He advised, “Live in Love (v.2). Be kind to one another (v.7). Let no evil talk come out of your mouth, but what is only useful for building up as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear (v.29) and lastly, forgiving another as God in Christ forgave you (v.32).”

Church should not be a hiding place nor a secret membership gathering, rather it must be visible to be known well as a significant community to our neighbors. Unfortunately, our neighbors may not well recognize that our church is here to serve our community on this hill. We are people of the United Methodist Church with “open hearts, minds and doors.” We should make ourselves more visible to our community and we should act more boldly to share Christ’s love with our neighbors and friends. Our motto doesn’t only “open our hearts, minds and doors”, but it also means that we should go and open people’s closed hearts, and open their narrow minds as well. We are active Methodist people for transformation of the world! If someone says, “I am very discouraged. What should I do?” Jesus Christ responds to us, “Encourage others.” Fair Oaks Church should be a community of hope, love and trust. Amen.