

Eighth Sunday After Pentecost | July 18, 2021

Message: Is There a Church Within Us?

Guest Pastor Patti Steevens

During the children's time, we did the finger play of 'here is the church'. How many of you remember it? *Here is the church; Here is the steeple Open the doors and here are the people.* The second part is similar: *Here is the church; Here is the steeple, Open the doors and let out the people.* Most of you are probably familiar with that part—but what about the LAST part? *Here is the church; Here is the steeple. Open the doors.....but where are the people? The people ran home, ate lunch and went to bed.* Most kids like to pantomime that last part, especially when I let them get up and REALLY act it out.

The sad part is that this is reality for so many people without even realizing it. Because in reality, when worship is over don't most of us exit as fast as we can?! We have stuff to do & the weekends are way to short!

Even when we stick around for coffee hour, all too often we already forget what was talked about in worship. We forget our 'motto' for the United Church of Christ: 'that all are welcome here.' If we truly lived that, would we not invite a stranger or at least someone we didn't know well to join us at table?

As I read the scripture readings for today, I was reminded that God is not just found inside the 'temple' or church building; but rather God is to be encountered everywhere. God doesn't need a temple or any other type of building to be found. So why do I encourage you to stick around for coffee? Well because inside these walls is where you can practice that welcoming hospitality. Being nice, friendly and accommodating is not always easy. But where else can we learn/practice those skills in a safe place? And within these walls, should be a safe place. Once you can become comfortable with being accepting and welcoming in here; it will be easier to recognize God in other places. I don't just mean, seeing God in a sunset or a rainbow or a majestic mountain; but rather seeing Christ in some ONE else, being Christ-like to someone else. We all know how easy it is to see God in a baby; but what about that obnoxious teenager or the person who looks like they haven't showered in a week or all year! Or even the person who is pretty nice but just a real annoying pest, can you see God in them?

Christ did not want only certain people to be able to enter the holy temple. Christ wanted us to be a holy temple in our daily lives. We are called to expand our understanding that God does not dwell just within certain walls nor that God can be contained by walls.

Jesus did very little preaching or teaching inside the temple walls. But there are plenty of examples of Jesus showing the love of God out in the village streets, fields and even on the beach. Jesus also demonstrated that he didn't just stay in his 'comfort zone' but he went out to where the people were, all types of people. No matter who approached him, they were heard and accepted.

The United States and the UCC have made progress in the areas of welcoming and acceptance. This church in particular has made great strides. Sponsoring/supporting the Pride March here in Medford, putting coats outside the church for people to just pick up when they need them, supporting the community homeless house and just becoming more involved in community activities. Please realize these are great strides that you have made right here in your home town!

Over the years, when Pastor Mary Jo would tell me about some of the activities here, I admit I would be a little envious! Not many local churches, my own included, have done so much toward building community. But don't think you can rest on your laurels! There is still work to be done out in this community and beyond. Inside these walls is a safe place to begin and the place to continue to practice. God knows if we wait until we can do this 'hospitality' stuff perfectly; we will never get outside these walls to be Christ in the world. And 'out there' is where Christ wants us to be.

The disciples didn't always 'get it' right either; but they were always given grace and mercy to try again. That part has not changed! We will continue to make mistakes, and we will continue to be offered grace and mercy to try again. And that is Good News, this day and every day!

Amen. Amen. Amen.