

Message: 1 Corinthians 3:10-11 – What are we building?

Story of Bremerhaven United Methodist Church¹:

Recently, Pastor Elle wrote this report about this small UMC in Germany; I will be quoting her. “For 40 years, the United Methodist congregation had shrunk; in the end, only about a dozen people came together in Peace Church in Bremerhaven city center. In 2006, it was confirmed that the building was to be sold. In the neighboring Lutheran church, the United Methodist assembly was offered a room on the top floor, a slight analogy to the Upper Room in Acts 1. There was quite a similar mood, too.

In 2010 the North Germany Annual Conference made a brave step: It was decided that once again a pastor should be dispatched to Bremerhaven. So Pastor Elle and her family moved there - a leap of faith on one hand, a clear personal call on the other. She often recalls words spoken during the first congregational meeting well before their actual move. **‘We are much too old. Nothing's going to change here.’** Could she, as well as the bishop and the superintendents, have misheard God's call?

Right at the start of her ministry she met with the congregation in her home, and was surprised by how many actually came; it felt like the house was about to explode. In Nov. 2010, they promised each other to pursue the Methodist cause in Bremerhaven. The number of people attending the Sunday service rose to 25. Their first attempts to find a suitable room for their meetings weren't successful.

So they started to get together outdoors. They organized their first open-air service on the fourth Sunday of Advent of 2010 on the ‘Drachenberg’ (Dragon's Hill), Bremerhaven's highest peak. **Who would come?**

When they appeared on the hill, they found that half of the city's population had already gathered there. Snow had fallen overnight and the Drachenberg was the ideal ski slope. They lit the pastoral fire and the people sat down on their sleds around the brazier. Each of them felt that these were the people that God had sent them to.

¹ <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/church-vitality-from-dying-to-reborn>

They held services at the harbor, in a graveyard, on a radar tower, in a pedestrian mall. They got a trailer, which they use for their equipment and as an advertising surface. And their cross always goes with them. It's well known in the city by now.

Back in 2010 they had arranged the seats in two rows. Over time it was three rows, then four. Now they usually put up five. In Sept. 2011, they began to realize why they had never succeeded in finding a new home for their gatherings. By now their congregation had grown so much that the old church was exactly the right size. They withdrew the decision to sell the building. The very same week they were donated a share of an inheritance and a member of their church won a lottery.

On the first Sunday in Advent 2012 they celebrated the re-consecration of their church building. Bishop Rosemarie Wenner came especially to participate. And again, the house was bursting at the seams. It felt just like the day two years earlier when they gathered in the pastor's parlor: **God has plans for us!**

They can't tell if this growth is going to continue. But that's not important, because their mission is to bring 'healing fellowship into a shaken city.' That's what they are, and that's what they live. The good thing is, the original remaining dozen people remain the core of their congregation. The new thing has sprung up not beside them, but around them. They were willing to let go of many things: of their church, their traditions, even of their congregation as a whole. After they had actually relinquished all that, God gave it back to them as a gift.

They are a growing congregation. These days they pray for 100 - and that figure isn't far away now. But being as he is, our God hasn't only granted growth in numbers, but also given back Peace Church. The theme of the consecration service was the words from Deuteronomy 6:22: *'Before our eyes the Lord sent signs and great wonders.'*

That's a marvelous story of rebirth, growth and spiritual maturity. It's a story that is being told in a number of sister United Methodist Churches world-wide. This story reminds us that we are members of a community founded by Jesus Christ, made to build each other up through acts of sacrificial love to reveal God for the benefit of the world. Peace Church

in Bremerhaven is a modern day example of what it means to live together as a community of faith in the way Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 3.

We read vv10-11 earlier today: *“According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ”* (NRSV). The work of Pastor Elle and the congregation in Bremerhaven would not have been successful if it had not been based on their faith in Jesus and their willingness to build on that foundation of faith, proclaiming the good news we have in Jesus Christ to their town.

How did they do it? They began with a foundation that can’t fail: the leaders and the members put their faith in Jesus Christ together. This is the foundation that Christ laid for us through his life, ministry, death on the cross and resurrection. It’s the same foundation that Paul taught to the church in Corinth when he spent 18 months with them. It’s the same foundation that underpins the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church, which were the church for 1500 years. It’s the same foundation that lifted up Martin Luther, John Calvin, John and Charles Wesley, and many other great church leaders. It’s the same foundation that lifts me up as your pastor and lifts all of us as members of this congregation. This foundation is possible because of the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf, the majesty of God’s love and the power of grace through the Holy Spirit.

Peace Church in Bremerhaven was not renewed because the Lone Ranger and Tonto rode to the rescue in the form of Pastor Elle and her family. It took regular, ordinary people in a small church in a small town coming together in unity, working together by faith, putting aside their preconceived notions of church, ministry and service to follow Christ. It took a group of people “walking the talk,” regardless of how foolish or uncomfortable they might have felt before their friends, family and neighbors. It took a group of people who did not accept the limitations of age and social, economic or political standing – there isn’t a hint of that to be heard; instead it was a group that generously shared.

It took a group of people who realized that their faith was not a private, personal thing; rather they were called to live their faith as a community, publically and without shame.

That’s the message Paul gave to the church in Corinth and it’s the message we hear from Peace Church in Bremerhaven and from vital congregations through the United Methodist Church. Build on the foundation we have in Christ, trusting in him with obedience and God will show signs and wonders to a world hungry for truth and love. There is no firmer foundation. Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth offers more teaching and it serves us well if we broaden our view a bit. When we think about building on the foundation, there’s an obvious question that comes to mind: **what are we building?**

1 Corinthians 3:1-9, 12-23 give us important clues. In v9 we read, “*For we are God’s servants, working together; you are God’s field, God’s building.*” The “you” in this verse is plural: we are God’s field, his building, his modern day temple. If you recall from the Old Testament, the temple was the place where God dwells. In Matthew 18:20, Jesus tells us, “*For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*” When we come together as a community, we are the body of Christ on Earth. Christ is present and actively working for our good through the Spirit. The community is the focus, not the individual. God’s Spirit is present and on display because of the foundation that Christ laid.

Yes, we exist and live in personal relationship to Christ, our Savior, but that relationship is designed to flourish when we are in a community. That’s where our character develops and grows as our view of the world changes. The Holy Spirit works in us through grace to free us from the moral compulsion to sin when we are in a community where we are unconditionally loved and accepted for who and what we are. Yes, that’s an ideal, but it’s one that are being led to as we come together to study Scripture, to learn what we believe as United Methodists, to share our experiences of God and to use our minds to make decisions for the good of the community and those who are lost.

Our work is to build up our congregation and other communities of faith. We do this by inviting others to come and be a part of our community. We plant the seed, inviting others into the relationship to help water that seed, and wait for God to make the relationship grow – to see the seed sprout. We are God’s co-workers, but he is the one who does the heavy lifting.

Here is an image that may help: think of yourself as a brick used to build walls and other structures of faith. We are supported by others in our community and supporting others in turn. As bricks, we are bonded together using “**relationship mortar**,” which allows us to be part of something that is greater than any individual brick. Once we are filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, the result of God’s grace is exponentially greater than the sum of our parts. We are not sufficient to the task individually; however, God’s grace is sufficient. Through Jesus, we can accomplish anything as his body on earth.

Paul also teaches us about the materials we use when we add others to our community, bonding with them in relationship and supporting each other through the good times and the difficult times. There are two types of materials: costly and cheap. Paul writes in vv12-13, “*Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw - the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done.*” The costly materials are gold, silver and precious stones, most likely marble or perhaps decorative stones. The cheap materials are wood, straw and hay.

Costly materials reflect the sacrificial aspect of God’s work (carrying the cross) – we have to sacrifice of ourselves, particularly our time, our attention and our willingness to love and accept each other even when we disagree, or feel hurt and don’t like one another. It is costly to be in relationship when you are on opposite sides of an issue – money, lifestyle, politics, or the way we serve God. Costly grace is the grace and love shown by death on a cross, the grace seen when we don’t seek our own way and follow our will, but we follow God’s will and we put others first.

Costly grace is seen in the ultimate expression of love: John 15:13, “*No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.*” Jesus commanded John and the disciples to love one another as he loved them (v12), telling them that they are his friends if they obey his command. Costly grace is the material we use in building one other up; it is the only way to create bonds of relationship that don’t crack and fray when they are put under the slightest stress and strain.

Cheap material reflects the superficial ways that we do God’s work – rather than helping find a solution, we complain, distance ourselves or fight. This is cheap grace. When we practice cheap grace, we only serve God when it is convenient: when we have the time, the interest, extra money or when we want to show off for others. We are still trying to be in control, to be the primary beneficiary of charity, attention and resources that come from service. Cheap grace is when we serve ourselves first and follow God’s will when it aligns to our view of the world, ignoring it when we feel confident and in control. Cheap grace creates relationships based on convenience and a “what’s in it for me?” attitude. And our behavior follows our attitude. Cheap grace robs the cross of its divine power and message, replacing it with a cheap, worldly substitute.

As members of the church and of this congregation, we are all builders, whether we intend to be or not. We build others up or tear others down by what we say and do, as well as what we don’t say and do. We are all building structures: relationships with others in the church and relationships with others in the community. One of the primary structures we build is the relationships we have with others in our family. Do we build them up, sacrificially investing our lives in them to teach them about Jesus with love and without shame or fear, asking others to help us? Or do we go it alone, because we know better, perhaps stunting the growth of the seed that is waiting to sprout?

Whatever we build, we need to know that there will be a test. Recall the words of v13, “*the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done.*” The day referred to by Paul is judgment day, when Jesus will return to earth with his full power,

majesty and glory. On that day, our community will be tested by fire. This is not a purifying refiner’s fire, but a fire that consumes, revealing stone and metal while consuming wood, hay and straw. Fire is a metaphor for conflict and warfare in the Bible. I believe that Paul is telling us that we will be tested on judgment day. I also believe that the kingdom of heaven is present on Earth today; Jesus’ birth, death and resurrection brought the kingdom to us. Therefore, I believe we will receive trials during our life on Earth. We will be challenged as a community and as a congregation in the United Methodist Church. We will each be given trials that will reveal the materials we are using to build up our church, family and others. **Investing our lives in others is costly and may require sacrifice, but what greater way is there for us to show our faith and our love for God?**

In closing, please allow me to suggest three ways we can apply Paul’s teaching:

- **Put others first** – show compassion and care for other members of our community of faith. Get to know each other – visitors and our brothers and sisters at the school and Boy Scouts; spend time in fellowship, stay for coffee rather than scattering to the four winds, listen to one another, call/visit each other, find ways to serve others.
- **Use your spiritual gifts** – God has given all of us many gifts. Some have the gift of hospitality, others gift of detail, still others heart for sharing the message of Jesus Christ, or teaching or performing an art, etc. Use your gifts to contribute and build up our community; do not to keep it hidden, underdeveloped and immature.
- **Don’t do it alone, out of your own strength** – ask others to help, even if you feel uncomfortable or embarrassed. We want to help, to see you succeed. Most of all turn to God first, in prayer, asking Jesus to show you the way. Come to church, participate in Bible Study, meet with a pastor for counsel and prayer, serve others to put your needs in perspective. All these honor God and bond you through the strength of everlasting relationship mortar, through grace.

Today, I pray God will convict your heart, Jesus will gather you into his flock, and the Holy Spirit will fill you with the power to join in as we revitalize our community of faith together. To God be the glory!

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18 (NRSV)

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy. When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God. You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the LORD. You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the LORD. You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the LORD. You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

I Corinthians 3:10-11 (NRSV)

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.