

Wesley United Methodist Church

Rev. Beverly E Stenmark

March 5, 2017

50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration

Charting our Future, While Remembering our Past

What a great day! As Christians, we are a people who take time seriously and take opportunities to look backwards as well as forward and I hope that we are doing both today.

50 years ago today, some of the people in this room gathered in the fellowship hall for the first worship service held here on the hill. We had been together as a congregation since about 4 years earlier, but during that time we worshipped in a couple of different locations. In our earliest years, we had three different church buildings and slowly watched as they were sold, or demolished. For a time, another congregation offered us a space to worship until this building, that would be our new home, was available.

I think that during that time, our focus was mostly on getting to know each other, becoming one congregation, and finding a new home. So, for many, it may have seemed that the first few years were like a prelude to our life and ministry that really seemed to begin on March 5, 1967 when we moved here to the hill. I think that's why we celebrate this as our anniversary.

That first worship service was held in the fellowship hall because this sanctuary was not yet ready – the pews had not arrived, the organ wasn't ready, but we gathered for worship with Rev. David Ripley and as was very appropriate for a new beginning, we also celebrated the baptism of Irene & Marty Briggs baby – Christine.

During the 50 years, there are people who have been here for worship almost every Sunday and at various times during the week. We have mourned the death of people we have loved, and we have celebrated

the birth of children. During the 50 years, our church family has changed with each new person who has become part of the community. Together we have grown in our faith and commitment to Jesus Christ. Together we have become the congregation that we are today.

I am particularly excited to be here today, because I was part of this congregation 50 years ago, and on and off for the next 20 years or so, depending upon where I was living during that time. Thirty years ago, I left to attend seminary and answer God's call to parish ministry and now I have the honor and privilege of serving this church as pastor.

Today we remember the past – as we look to the future.

The Scriptures for today were selected by me because they provide three messages that I want to highlight.

The first is that we have been blessed with all of the spiritual gifts that we need in order to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, both in the past and moving into the future. God has blessed us with people who have used their passion to lead this congregation in mission projects that have made a real difference in the lives of God's children. God has blessed us with people who were gifted and passionate about educating children and adults to know more about Jesus and who God calls us to be. God has blessed us with people who have shared their gifts of music to enrich our worship. We have been blessed by people who had gifts of administration, finances, knowledge of buildings, ability to repair things and so many more gifts that working together have built a congregation seeking to follow Jesus in all that we do.

As Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, so we, too, are not lacking in any spiritual gifts. As we celebrate those gifts in the past, we must also ask

ourselves, how we are using those gifts today, and how we will respond to God's call in our life in the future.

The second thing that I want us to think about is both literal and symbolic. We are a church that is built on a rock. Luke's Gospel tells us that those who hear God's word and act upon it are like the man who built his house on a rock, with a solid foundation, so that when the storms and floods came, the house was strong and could not be shaken.

Our church is quite literally built upon a rock. During the planning of construction, it was a challenge to find just the right place on this hill where the church could be built. But we are also built upon another rock. We are built upon the rock of our faith in God and the commitment to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. It is this faith that has guided us and carried us through the past and into the present and future. There have been some difficult times in the life of this congregation – times when it might have been easy to give up and walk away, but staying focused on God kept the foundation from being shaken and destroyed.

Every home owner knows that there are repairs that need to be made. Sometimes there are additions to be built, roofs to be replaced and rooms to be repainted. In the life of a church we also must do those things. Sometimes the additions to be built are new ministries that respond to the needs of the community. The roof that needs to be replaced may be a program or ministry that has served well for a time but no longer seems to be working. It may no longer be the best way to respond to God's call and it needs to be replaced with something different. The rooms that need to be repainted may be changes in the way we are doing something so that we can continue to be faithful to God.

The third thing I want us to think about, is again both literal and symbolic. Besides being built on a rock – we are also on a hill. Matthew's Gospel tells us that a city built on a hill cannot be hid. Now, quite frankly that may be true in Israel where there are not large forests so that you can often see for quite a distance and a city built on a hill would be quite visible. Cities were often built on a hill for protection. It would be difficult, if not impossible, for soldiers to approach a city without being seen by those who were on look-out.

We live in an area where people can, and do, often keep their homes secluded by trees – and indeed, our building up here on the hill is really quite well hidden from view. But the point Jesus is making, in Matthew's gospel, is that we should not hide ourselves but rather that we should be visible so that others can see the good work being done for God's glory. We have a beautiful setting here and one that we appreciate. I was talking with someone from a community group that uses this building and she said that after driving a distance through the city to get here, when she turns onto our driveway and comes up the hill, she breathes a little sigh and feels like she has entered a little oasis or get-away from her chaotic life. That is a good thing for her and something she cherishes.

At the same time, being on a hill can give one a feeling of isolation or separation. Throughout our history, this congregation has reached out to people in many ways. Typically, we have not been a hidden location. On the other hand, I have also had people tell me that they have had trouble finding us. I sometimes wonder if I went to the people who live in the houses on Woodland Street, how many of them would know that there is a church up here, and how many of them would have any idea what we do here. Our position here on the hill, offers us both opportunities and

challenges in remaining visible and faithful. We can take advantage of this wonderful location and use it to serve God, while at the same time, we may realize that there are times when we may need to come down off the hill that we can be more accessible and visible to others.

We know the ways in which we reach out to our local community and to our wider world. Common Cathedral, Bridge Liberia, the Food Pantry, gifts to families at Christmas, a service of hope at Christmas for those who are mourning, faithful participation in our mission shares, involvement with United Methodist Elder Care are just a few of the many ways that our faithfulness reaches beyond our hill. Many of you have your own favorite ministry in which you are involved – ministries that many of us may not know about – but important ways in which you live out your faith and let your light shine. I might suggest that as we move into the future, we might find ways to share some of those ministries so that others might also become aware and we might find ways to connect with each other in these important ministries.

As we celebrate and remember the past, we should also ask ourselves and God in what new ways we might reach beyond the hill and share God's word and love with a world that desperately needs to be touched by God's love.

So, as we remember the past, and chart our way into the future, I would remind us that we are not lacking in any spiritual gift that we need to do God's work, we are built on a strong foundation and can face any storms that come our way if we are listening to God and following God's way, and our position on this hill offers us both opportunities and challenges in following God.

Friends, we celebrate today, 50 years of life, love, ministry and mission based in this location. I pray that some of the children, youth, and young adults here today will, in 50 years, be celebrating 100 years of ministry and faithfulness to God by the members and friends of the Wesley United Methodist Church.