



247 Broad Street | Red Bank NJ 0770
(732) 747-0446 | www.umcredbank.org

October 8, 2017

Put Yoyur Whole Self IN – Presence

Hebrews 10:23-25

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Last week, we kicked off a new worship series “Put Your Whole Selves In”, focusing on a holistic understanding of stewardship - seeing everything we have and everything we are, as blessings from the God who created all we are and know, which means that how we use our time, talents, and treasures impacts our faith. Big picture stewardship is about faithfulness in how we live in all aspects of our lives, which includes, but is not limited to, how much we put in the offering plate on Sunday. We opened our series by digging into the first of our 5 membership vows - prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness – and looked for where God might be calling us to grow and stretch in our prayer lives. We compiled the reflections and pledges we offered last week into this word cloud, which we’ll bring to the Fellowship Hall after worship so you all can check it out, be inspired by the dreams and hopes of others, and continue reflecting on what you will choose as your prayer pledge in the coming year. We’ll continue to build these word clouds throughout the month, spelling out UMCRB with our dreams.

This week, we move on to our second membership vow – presence – as we explore why presence is such a priority in our faith development. And so we turn to our Gospel reading for this morning, coming from...

John 15:1-11

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. ~~Whoever does not abide~~

~~in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.~~ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

A member of a church, who had previously been attending services regularly, suddenly stopped coming to church. After a few weeks, the Pastor decided to visit. The Pastor found the man at home, sitting before a blazing fire. Guessing the reason for the Pastor's visit, the man welcomed him, led him to a comfortable chair near the fireplace and waited. He made himself at home, but said nothing, and in the silence, contemplated the dance of the flames. After some minutes the Pastor took the fire tongs, carefully picked up a brightly burning ember and placed it to one side of the hearth all alone. Then he sat back down, still silent. The host watched all this in quiet contemplation. As the lone ember's flame flickered and diminished, there was a momentary glow and then its fire was no more. Soon it was cold and dark. The Pastor glanced at his watch and realized it was time to leave. He slowly stood up, picked up the cold ember and placed it back in the middle of the fire. Immediately it began to glow, once more with light and warmth of the burning coals around it. As the Pastor reached the door to leave, his host said with a tear running down his cheek, "Thank you so much for your fiery sermon. I'll see you back in church next Sunday"

We said last week that not only does the church need people, volunteers and disciples who step up to serve in the different ministry areas, but that people need the church, that there is something about the community of faith that helps to strengthen and spur us on in our own faith life and spiritual growth. I've heard it said that Christianity is a team sport... we can't practice our faith in seclusion, separated from the Body of Christ that we call the church. I don't mean that we can't know God and have some understanding of who Jesus is without being part of a church, but the Holy Spirit fire that lights us up is fueled by the community that we call the Body of Christ.

I've mentioned before that when I went to college, I stopped going to church. For a few years, I just attended on holidays – Christmas and Easter, or when I would go home for the weekend. During that time, I totally disconnected from the faith community, and while my beliefs didn't change, the way I embodied them (or failed to) did. Looking back now, I see that my life was completely centered around me... my classes, my coursework, my job, my boyfriend, my social life, my my my... I didn't even realize it at the time, but the world revolved around me – at least in my mind. Now I wasn't a bad person... I just didn't make others a priority. It wasn't until I moved home and reconnected with our church that I began to look outside my own perspective again. I participated in a young adult mission trip doing Katrina relief in New Orleans, I joined the praise band and made connections with others in the church. Singing these new songs about God, being surrounded by a community again, relit the flame of my faith. A friend from the band and I challenged each other to participate in the Lenten small group study – *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the*

Boat – and by chance, our small group leader was Rev. Christina Zito. That class was the first time in many years that I had really applied what I heard at church to my own life. We had deep and personal conversations – we opened up with each other, supported one another, and cried together. It was through the sharing and reflection in that small group that I began to hear my call to ministry again – something that had come and gone in waves since I was in 7th grade. I started to wrestle with not only what **I** wanted to do with the rest of my life, but what **God** wanted from me and for me. I will always be thankful for that small group experience, for the people around that table who listened and prodded, encouraged and helped me dream.

Can we be Christians without active participation in the life a church, yes... but will our faith have the strength and power to transform us and the world around us... not likely. Our scriptures today both talk about the importance of connection – connection with one another, and connection with the spirit of Christ. The writer of the Hebrew letter challenges us to “hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering”. That’s not always an easy thing to do. Especially in our world today, when in the midst of recovery from hurricanes and earthquakes, fires and floods, we witness purposeful devastation caused by bullets raining down into a crowd in Las Vegas. In a world with so much pain, violence, hatred, and war, it can be tough to hold on to hope. That’s why the writer tells us to look for ways to “provoke one another to love and good deeds... encouraging one another.” Our presence with one another, our comfort and support, is one of the ways we hold on to hope in the midst of despair.

In our Gospel reading, we hear Jesus compelling his followers to “abide in him” as he abides with God. Abide, to stay close, remain connected, always drawing strength and guidance from the tap root connecting us all together. While we **can** be religious or spiritual without the presence of other people in our lives, we cannot be growing disciples without the encouragement, guidance, wisdom, and accountability of other disciples.

Methodists love to retell the story of John Wesley’s heart-warming experience on May 24, 1738. He records in his *Journal* that he went “very unwillingly” to a small-group Bible study that was meeting in Aldersgate St. in London. He went unwillingly, but none-the-less, he went. Maybe he was tired. Maybe he had worked all day and just wanted to kick up his feet and relax. Maybe he was struggling with one of the people he knew would be there... but he went. He was present. That night, the spirit of God touched his heart. He wrote, “I felt my heart strangely warmed.” That heart-warming experience was a critically important stop along his personal journey of discipleship, which helped ignite the spiritual awakening that swept across England and became the Methodist movement we’re a part of today.

But what would have happened – or NOT happened – if Wesley had not been “unwillingly” present that night? I’m not going to promise that your hearts will be “strangely warmed” every time we are present with a small group or present in worship. But I can promise that it won’t happen if we aren’t there! Our presence matters because it is the connection among us, the conversations and community that we build that fans the flames of our faith and could result in the transformation of our lives and the world around us!

As you entered worship, you received a slip of paper along with your bulletin, and I ask that you take that out now, as well as something to write with. As we reflect on the gift of presence, of not just showing up, but giving yourself over to an experience, I invite you to think about your level of participation and how you support the church with our presence. On this paper, I invite you to write down two things, on the side that says "Presence Now", I invite you to share a word or phrase that communicates your current level of participation in the church through presence... and on the side that says "Presence Pledge", say a word about something you'd like to try or change about how you support the church and your spiritual development through your presence. Is there a small group you'd like to try, a book or theme you'd like to explore with a group, a worship routine you'd like to get into, a person or group you need to stop avoiding? As the offering plates are passed, we invite you to drop your paper in, offering your reflections to God. There's no right or wrong answers here, and please don't write your name on these... I'll give us about two minutes to reflect and write and then we'll break the silence as we move into the Pastoral Prayer. Let us take this time for reflection...