

Uncharted Territory

Romans 12:1-2

A short while ago, we asked Megan and Antonio among other promises, if they would help Mikayla be a faithful member of the church of Jesus Christ by offering her the nurture of the church. And you, the congregation, promised to love and support and care for Mikayla as she lives and grows in Christ under our wings. Big far-reaching promises.

We did the same in the past year for Mattea, Scarletrose, Sebastian, another Mikayla and Caleb. But I am wondering what kind of church they will grow up in. What will the Church (with a capital “C”) look like, and thus what might FCCB look like as these children grow older? A big far-reaching question for us and for our society and indeed for the world.

Without belaboring the fact, the world in front of us is nothing like the world behind us. Sad as it sounds, and as mightily some might wish to deny it, we are now living in what has been called a “post-Christian” world – meaning that the 1700 year long era with Christianity at the center of Western cultural life is over. You know what I am talking about – the reports and statistics show that churches are dying, or in steady decline; spirituality is popular but it is very individualistic; “none” (spelled n-o-n-e) is the fastest growing religious affiliation declared by people being interviewed; and church is but one option for a “salad bar” mentality when people chooses what to do with their time and commitment and money just as you select from the salad bar in a deli what you want to put on your plate.

This is true in general across America and Europe, and, from our SCC report (those listening sessions and their summary which we engaged in last year), we know that things have changed a lot in our church over the past 10 years in terms of membership, participation, and functioning. If you wonder what I am talking about, you can read or re-read the report for yourselves. Available through the office.

The world before us is nothing like the world behind us on ever so many fronts – including the church and church life. It has moved so fast that many of us are bewildered and asking if we can keep up or what’s next. So the question is *where does the church, and we at FCCB along with it...where do we go when the journey goes off the map? How do we live and spread the gospel of Jesus Christ in uncharted territory.*

A fascinating book that I have been reading called *Canoeing the Mountains* suggests that we look to the Lewis and Clark expedition for some answers to that question. Without turning this sermon into a history lecture, fascinating as that might be, let’s review a bit of that amazing journey across America back in the early 1800’s. Lewis and eventually Clark were commissioned by Thomas Jefferson to find the *most direct and practical water communication across the continent for the purpose of commerce*. But the expedition was built on a false set of expectations – that the unexplored west would have the same geography as the east. The thinking was that after some distance up the Missouri River, the men would walk up a hill, look down a gentle slope, find a stream and coast to the finish line at the Pacific Ocean. Thus they carried their canoes on their backs when they weren’t paddling them up-stream. Imagine their shock when they reached the Continental Divide at Lemhi Pass and saw before them mile upon mile of the “most terrible mountains that I ever beheld,” according to one journal. Not the bluffs of the Appalachians, but the Rockies! It was

clear that canoes were not the way to go across those treacherous snow-covered peaks. And “everything that they had expected and accomplished to that point was only a prelude to what was in front of them.”

What to do? Adapt. Adapt! As Lewis and Clark were about to go off the existing map into uncharted territory, they had to change plans, give up expectation, reframe their entire mission to meet the new realities of their project and commission. And with excellent leadership, risk-taking, heroic efforts, strong corporate commitment, great endurance and trust in one another, they reached the Pacific Ocean in the wicked winter of 1806 with some very important political and economic consequences for our nation.

Tod Bolsinger, the author of the book I mentioned, uses the Lewis and Clark expedition as a metaphor for the present moment in every field of our society – history, technology, organizations of all sorts, including the church – as we come to grips with the awareness that the world before us is radically different from everything behind us. We need to adapt. We need to think about what’s next. In fact, that is the name – *next church* – given by some to what the church is called to become if it is to continue its vibrant calling to be the church of Jesus Christ to all the world in the time ahead. *Next Church, emergent church, missional church*. The church “defined by its calling and sending whose purpose is to serve God’s healing purposes for all the world as God’s witnessing people to all the world.” Let me repeat that as it would make a fine mission statement for this church, for any church, as it heads further into the 21st Century and beyond.

We are a church defined by our calling and sending whose purpose is to serve God’s healing purposes for all the world as God’s witnessing people to all the world.

Note the key words in that statement. *Calling, sending, witnessing*. Isn’t that what the apostles were instructed to be and do? Those men and women of long ago called to follow Jesus, to be sent out to the wider world and to witness to what they had seen and known in Jesus and the good news he brought to a hurting but eager world. We, you and I, are called to be apostles. Apostles sent into the world as the “rightful and faithful continuation of Jesus’ own sending by God. “ That is a big commission – as they hymn goes, *Lord, you give the Great Commission, “Heal the sick and preach the word.” Lest the church neglect its mission and the gospel goes unheard, help us witness to your purposes with renewed integrity.*

Big! Apostles, missionaries, witnesses – wow, that’s a lot to bite off. It means we are supposed to go out of these cherished walls, out beyond our comfort level and our concern with survival, It means being agents of God’s mission to the world – agents....*lest the church neglect its mission and the gospel goes unheard*. That’s an unthinkable loss. The gospel unheard. Our mandate as the Body of Christ calls us to be a *missional* church, the *next*, the *emerging*, the *becoming*, church, if you will, with an unique and apostolic mission to fulfill in our local setting and beyond.

How do we move into the uncharted territory ahead of us? How do we adapt, change, reframe and still hold fast to what is eternal and lasting, sustaining and enabling, both comforting and challenging? That is the question before us –before all of us, our pastoral

and lay leadership, all of us in the pews and on the rolls, all those we baptize and nurture and teach, Mikayla and her sisters and brothers in Christ? What do we let go of, what do we hold on to? What is sacred and what is transitory? What must be preserved? What can be discarded or reconfigured as no longer serving us well anymore? What needs to be created?

This is the work, the discerning, the praying about, the asking for the Spirit's guidance, which lies ahead of us as Christians and as members and friends of FCCB. We are not trying to fix things in order to merely survive, but we adapt to thrive. We exist as a church "to reveal the presence and character of God in our world, being transformed ourselves as we participate in God's transforming work in the world. " As the system is transformed, we are personally transformed too. Or maybe it is vice versa? Either way... Scripture says: *Do not be conformed to this world [with its "none-s" and "salad bar" approach to life],, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

But lest we find it onerous or tragic that we have come to this point, lest you fear that all you value and all that find comforting and sustaining might be lost in exploring new ways, new paths, I invite you to ask yourselves *Could it be that God is taking our churches and organizations into uncharted territory in order for us to become even more of a witness for the future of the world? Could this be an opportunity put before us by God for adventure, hope and discovery?* Lewis and Clark's discovery was not what they expected, the west was not like the east, and it was a most difficult demanding journey, but what a wide world opened up before them. In order to thrive, rather than merely survive, our church must continue, with God's help, to become what it is meant to be – a sending out as an extension of the Jesus' own sending by God. Mission is not one committee, one board among many like education, worship and hospitality, which meet the needs of the church. It is our reason for being; it is the end which justifies the means. Please understand this. It does not mean our jettisoning of all that we have been, all that we have done, all that we have practiced. It is not throwing everything out to become something brand new, following a current fad, a keeping up with the times. More accurately it is a return to what was originally the call to the disciples and the apostles – their sending out to spread the good news to those who needed to hear it. And it is our calling - to go out and witness to the One who is our *One Foundation*, who promises to be with us always, to the end of the age. Let us not be timid or worried, but let us be grateful and excited that we are part of this moment in time. This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.

May it be so. Amen.

Sermon preached by Susan Power Trucksess, First Congregational Church in Branford, January 21, 2018.

Notes:

I am deeply indebted for insights and quotations to Tod Bolsinger's *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (Downer's Grove, IL; IVP Books, 2015).