

July 17, 2016

Dent Davis
Tryon Presbyterian Church

Building Community

Romans 12:1-6

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, 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. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us.

How many of you all go to the gym to exercise? Mary and I go to PRO Therapy, Last week when I was there I couldn't help noticing the cartoon they had on the bulletin board. Two women in exercise clothes were sitting at a table at Starbucks having coffee. One points to an electronic bracelet on her arm and remarks: "It keeps track of how long you've been wearing workout clothes without actually working out."

Actually I regularly see a bunch of you there ay PRO working out as well. And I know that some of you go to exercise at your retirement center, and other gyms, as well as the YMCA. I don't know whether you've noticed or not, but people do all kinds of things at the gym. I watch people lifting weights, swimming, playing basketball, and doing circuit training, or coaching, or chair exercises, or walking on a treadmill or elliptical machine. Then there's also those who do Pilates, Zumba, step aerobics, yoga, group cycling, and boot camp. And that's only a few of the options.

One thing I've noticed at the gym is that a lot of times there's strength in numbers. I can't tell you how many people have said that if it weren't for the people in their exercise class, they probably wouldn't exercise. Others have said

some of their best friends are their exercise partners. Relationships matter, even at the gym.

And relationships matter elsewhere as well. I think of the many stories I've heard of heroic acts of caring for comrades on the battlefield. I think of stories surrounding 911, things that happened in the aftermath of the shootings in Charleston and Sandy Hook, and more recently, extraordinary examples of sharing and support in Dallas, New Orleans, and Minneapolis. Relationships make a difference.

Relationships matter at the church as well. In fact one could say that Christianity is all about relationships – relationships with God, with each other, and even with ourselves. Now we may call those relationships by different names. Sometimes we speak of fellowship, or friendship, or a sense of community. The traditional theological word for church relationships is “covenant.” The Bible also speaks of hospitality, love, sharing, or forgiveness.

All relationships are challenging at times, but it is also uncanny how other people help get us through the hard times in life. I've watched it happen over and over again in this church, as people step up and help others at a time of loss, or when someone is ill, or has some special need. In the church we call that “community” – a shared spiritual bond with another person. Our first lesson this morning describes the relationships the early Christians had with each other in the Book of Acts. The text describes a community of faith where people really cared for each other and shared with each other, sacrificing for the greater good of all; a community that supported each other in friendship and prayer. And the passage from Romans in our second lesson describes some of the attitudes and actions that are required in order to have a community of faith such as humility and caring, and using one's gifts for the common good.

Relationships are all different. Sometimes they bring joy, sometimes pain. They can also bring extraordinary meaning, or despair. Authentic Christian community is not easy. It takes time, patience, persistence, and sometimes luck to make a real friend, or to turn an enemy into a friend. Maybe that's one reason why the Bible is filled with so many stories about the joys and challenges of relationships.

Almost anywhere you turn in the Bible, the story is about relationships and community. Think about it: Mary and Joseph, the birth of Jesus, the Wise Men, the calling of the disciples, the Feeding the Five Thousand, the Good Samaritan, the Lord's Supper – all are about relationships with God and among people. And there are many more.

The heart of the community of faith is in our relationship with God, and each other. Christ taught that God loves us even though we do not deserve it, and when we realize the depths of that love we are forever changed. Christ living in our hearts and minds changes the way we see other people, and the way we live together as a community of faith. And in our bruised and broken world today few things are needed more. Relationships matter. In fact building

an authentic community of faith is one of the most important gifts we could give to help our local community, and our world today.

One of the reasons we are going to all the trouble to make changes in our building is to strengthen our ability to become an authentic community of faith. To be a welcoming community we need places for gathering, opportunities for conversations, and the ability to hear and see. We need to eliminate barriers to that prevent us from being a community of faith. So even the bathrooms are important, and a place to put name tags. The changes we are making also enable us to offer more hospitality to others in our community. To be sure the building itself is only a part of the process of living our faith, but it's an important part. It builds our capacity for authentic Christian community.

But there's more as well. The project itself has already built relationships and deepened faith. I've watched the interactions, conversations, questions and comments as you've worked to get your arms around this project. I've listened as people have struggled with the amount of their gift. I've observed the many hours that the committee has spent in the design. I've watched as very different people have changed their opinions and grown closer together in doing this work. I don't know what the future holds, but I do know that if we successfully complete this project we will be different when it's over. Our church will be a different place, not just physically, but spiritually. That's why we decided to call this campaign "Building on Our Faith." We are literally building faith as we build together. We are building the Body of Christ and the community of faith.

Actually what we're doing here is nothing new. It's been happening for a long time. Doing something big and beautiful for God brings people together and deepens faith. That happened when the ancient Hebrews built the Tabernacle in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. It happened when the Temple in Jerusalem was built, and rebuilt.

And it has happened many times since. I love the story of the building of Chartres Cathedral in France. I've shared parts of it before. The year was 1144. Times were hard. People had to deal with the plague. Taxes were high and the economy uncertain. Wars and conflicts were common. The Crusades had been going on for some time. A new cathedral was being built in Chartres. It was a very unusual building project, and expensive too. It was a different kind of church. The project had a rocky beginning. There were mistakes. People were not really sure what was going on. There was some confusion about design.

At first people asked questions. They grumbled a bit, and they waited. Then they came to look. And then they came to build – by the hundreds. The building itself was spectacular, but what was happening to the people was even more spectacular. As Robert de Mont-Saint-Michel, a contemporary historian, wrote in the Twelfth Century describing the project:

Whoever saw or heard the like? Lords and Princes, full of riches and honors, even women of noble birth, their proud heads bowed, harnessed like beasts of burden to carts, bringing wine, corn, oil,

lime, stones, and timbers for the church. More than a thousand people are there, and nothing can stop them. Men and women humble themselves, do penance, forgive their enemies. They work, they sing, they pray, giving thanks for the miracle God is performing before their eyes. You could see the spires rising slowly toward heaven and the brilliant colors of the windows taking shape.

That building was a statement of faith. And that cathedral at Chartres still speaks its message of faith today.

Our sanctuary where we sit in worship today also speaks of the faith of our foreparents, men and women who worked and sacrificed together to give us this place of worship. If you look with care you can see their faith at work in the stones, the windows, and the magnificent design of this building. We are here because of their faith. Listen to the words of dedication for this building first given on October 22, 1958, some 58 years ago:

This building is dedicated in living memory of those whose hearts and hands have served this church, with gratitude for loyal members who have come with us in this spiritual adventure, and with hopes for those who will walk with us in this way in days to come.

We are heirs of that hope today. Today we take an important step of faith as we dedicate our gifts and pledges to support this effort. But today is also just the beginning. Every day God gives us opportunity to build on our faith in many different ways, to work together to make the faith that is in our hearts, real in our actions. Faith is always a challenge. It is always easier to talk about faith, than it is to live it, and this project is just a reminder. Today we have a rare opportunity that doesn't happen often in the life of a church to build on our faith, to build something beautiful for God. I invite you to join in taking the next step of faith for Tryon Presbyterian Church.