

KEEP BUILDING
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Fourth Sunday of Easter
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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Today's lesson is about losing a beloved and trusted leader. When Jesus departed his friends were at a loss. Who will lead us now, they cried. Who will be our shepherd?

As it turns out, the Good Shepherd had never been Jesus alone. The Good Shepherd is older, in time and beyond time, and more cosmic than one person. Jesus manifested and revealed that good spirit.

While nursing their loss, the spirit of Jesus arose within his dejected friends. A fledgling community arose that would evolve—by fits and starts—into a world wide Beloved Community embracing all sorts of people.

But it began with a few simple practices, practices that we continue more or less right here every Sunday.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42-47)

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching—that would be what we call the gospels—and to fellowship—that would be potluck suppers, cake in the Fellowship Hall, but also real caring for one another in a variety of ways—to the breaking of bread—that would be the Eucharist—and the prayers—and that would be, well, prayers—prayers of confession, prayers of thanksgiving, and prayers for others.

People saw signs and wonders and amazement befell everyone. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved—and that would be "saved" not from some hell later but hell on earth, namely the hell of being self-centered, or racially and ethnically centered, afraid to welcome the other.

To be saved literally means to be made whole. That's salvation. Walls were broken down. The door was pushed open. All were welcomed. It was the beginning of a new creation. A new community was being built from the inside out.

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I never set out to build a reputation for myself or this church. But things happen. For better or worse, I got one and you got one. And, as it turns out, our respective reputations are a mixed bag.

I can't tell you how many times—in phone calls, letters, emails, on the sidewalks or in the aisles of Food Lion—I've been accused of being a false prophet, a vile and dangerous preacher leading my sheep astray and putting their souls in jeopardy of hellfire.

That's one thing I'll surely miss in retirement!

Nor can I tell you how often this church has been accused of being a den of iniquity—a bunch of heretics and infidels besmirching the purity of Christ’s holy name. Even when I’m gone, you’ll be stuck with that reputation. Wear it proudly, people. Wear it proudly!

But there’s another side to our reputation of which we can be truly proud and grateful. This past Tuesday I underwent “the exit interview for departing pastors.” A representative of our Presbytery posed a series of questions. The first was: *what do you consider your most effective accomplishment.*

First off I dislike that sort of question. I alone accomplished nothing. It takes a congregation, I told him. I was just lucky enough to land in a good place at a good time.

Of course, a congregation needs a pastor or a leader the way sheep need a shepherd. But that analogy is misleading, especially around here. I never felt I was leading clueless sheep. It felt more like herding goats! And I like it like that. If there’s a clueless, compliant sheep among you, I’d like to see it before I retire.

I like feisty parishioners who bark and bite and nudge me to places I might not have discovered on my own. It takes a congregation to raise a pastor. And I think you’ve done a pretty good job. I just hope your next pastor gets the same treatment.

I will admit I am proud of one particular thing we have accomplished together. It’s something we have built.

No, it’s not the remodeling of this sanctuary in the 1990s even though it turned out beautiful.

It’s not the renovation of the Fellowship Hall and the addition of the second floor in 2002 even though that turned out beautiful.

It’s not the rebuilding of our front porch and the addition of the westside portico although those are very cool.

It’s not the installation of 60 solar panels even though that is very, very cool in more ways than one.

And no it’s not the numerical growth from 100 members to nearly 350 even though that too is very cool and a sign of a healthy and engaging church.

All of that matters.

But what matters most to me is the “welcoming church” we have built.

Many disillusioned with religion in general and the church in particular have found this a safe and healing place. Many LGBT persons likewise have found this a safe and healing place.

As someone said, “SPC is the church of last resorts.” And I like that reputation.

Over the past 40 years I’ve served on various committees of our Presbytery and heard many churches lament their loss of members and the lack of families, children and young people. Many say: if only they could get a “praise band” with an electric guitar and a drum set, maybe young people would come to church. No, I have to tell them, I don’t think that’s the secret.

And then I'm asked: what is the secret? Why is your church so vibrant? Why is it growing when so many other churches are dying on the vine?

Well, I tell them: first of all it helps to be in a town or region where more people are moving in than out. So, there's that simple fact. But if you got that going for you, then there are some things you could do.

First, I tell them: it helps if you publically and consistently proclaim that love—rather than Jesus or a sectarian form of Christianity—*is the way, the truth and the life*. Love is the way. Period.

It also helps if you publically and consistently proclaim that all people, including Muslims are beloved children of God.

It also helps if you publically and consistently celebrate science, including the grand and glorious story of evolution. You don't have to sing "Happy Birthday" to Charles Darwin as our children did on the 200th anniversary of his birthday but you could at least sing Darwin's praises now and then.

It also helps if you publically and consistently welcome LGBT persons, include them in the full life and ministry of the church, and officiate same sex marriages every chance you get.

And, oh, one more thing, I tell them. It might help if you install solar panels.

I tell them all of that and they usually shake their head and say: *wish we could, but we can't do that*.

Well, guess what? We have. Together we built more than a reputation. We built a truly welcoming place. No, the work is not done. That work is never complete.

We must keep building.

And so I urge you: Do not grow weary or discouraged. The Good Shepherd will lead you into green pastures and anoint your wounds with the oil of grace. The Good Shepherd will walk with you through every dark valley. Be not afraid. For goodness and mercy shall follow you always and always.

Keep building a place where love can dwell and all can safely live.

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Hymn 301
"Let Us Build a House"