

“We Are One”

Galatians 3:23-29

Sermon by Linda Kelly-Baker, Pastor for Urban Ministries

First United Methodist Church, Sacramento, CA

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A friend of mine once remarked about the necessary diversity of my professional wardrobe. I used to have three sets of work clothes for my three very different types of employment. At the time I worked at a spiritual formation center in Davis, as a leader of retreats at beautiful retreat centers in California and Nevada, and at a dance studio teaching ballroom and Latin dance. So I had my conservative pastor-like clothes for my day job, casual, relaxed clothes when I led groups on weekend retreats in the mountains and on the sea shore, and my sexy dance teacher clothes when I taught social dance classes at a studio. Sometimes I didn't have time to go home to change in-between so I carried what I needed in my car. The trunk looked like a closet as I carried my dance shoes and clothes to my next job, along with a sleeping bag for retreats, and my hiking boots. Now I carry my gym bag and tennis shoes in the car, along with my dance shoes, just in case I need them. We all have different outfits for different occasions in our lives. But there is one set of clothes we can be dressed in all the time: our commitment to follow Jesus, and live and love as Jesus lived and loved. As Paul said to the church in Galatia, we are clothed in Christ and it shines through all that we do wherever we go.

In my Side-By-Side office is a framed quote from St. Francis of Assisi, “Preach the gospel at all times, when necessary use words.” I try to live my life by this quote, which to me says “live as Jesus lived.” This morning is one of those times when words are called for, which is quite intimidating after all the wonderful sermons from Pastor Kathi. Pastor Kathi asked me to share my vision for the church today, but first a bit of history.

It's been over three years since I wandered into this church looking for a place of quiet refuge and refreshment from my daily work with the homeless community. It was over nine years ago I began a listening ministry with the homeless guests who use the services of Friendship Park at Loaves & Fishes. The program directors gave me permission to be a wandering spiritual companion amongst the people there and after a year, I was given a small, private office space to use and Side-By-Side ministries was born. Eventually Loaves & Fishes even gave me an annual grant to help fund the work along with donations from churches, individuals and the Board of Missions of the UMC. It is good work, and from what Jim Peth, the director of Friendship Park said to me the other day, a necessary work. Side-by-Side volunteers and I are the intentional, visible presence of the spiritual to the homeless community and to those who serve them. As I see it, the Side-by-Side listening companions try to be the heart of Jesus Christ in a place of despair, grief, sadness, addiction, mental illness and sometimes, general chaos.

The first Sunday I worshiped with you in 2006 was Labor Day weekend. Pastor Kathi was away and Carl Thomas was filling in. The night before a homeless man had died on the front steps of the church, and Carl offered prayers for him and others on the streets. I knew the man, and did his memorial service the next week in Friendship Park as I do for dozens of homeless folks each year. I invited Kathi to attend, and she did. That started our relationship and opened the door for me to join you as your Pastor for Urban Ministries for three years. The purpose of putting me on staff was two-

fold: to support me financially in the work I was already doing with Side-By-Side, and to help First UMC grow in its relationship with its homeless neighbors.

Let me say that I don't feel like I've done a lot to make anything happen here at First United Methodist Church. Maybe the words of St. Vincent de Paul are true: "If God is the center of your life, no words are necessary. Your mere presence will touch hearts." I try to keep God at the very center of all I do. I am far from perfect at it. But I've been blessed by being present among some very dedicated, very hard-working and visionary gospel living people in this church who have opened hearts and minds and doors to live the church in a new way.

Since I joined the staff, this is what I have observed: The community breakfast serving about 35-50 homeless and hungry folks once a month increased to over 120 people and is now twice a month. The guests are welcomed as Christ and now served restaurant style with ease and grace by willing volunteers. It's been a wonderful experience for the guests who look forward to our community breakfast Sundays when they can experience radical hospitality and good food provided by the members and friends of this church. My hopes for the future with the Community Breakfast is that we open ourselves even further to allow our guests to work with us in the kitchen and in the serving of the food. Everyone wants and needs to feel they have something to give, a purpose, a contribution to make to others for the betterment of the world. Wouldn't it be great if we can allow the community breakfast to be a place where one's self-worth and dignity is boosted by being in service to and with others in this simple way. There is a song whose first verse says, "Brother, sister let me serve you, let me be as Christ to you. Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too." ("The Servant Song," by Richard Gillard found in *The Faith We Sing*, pg. 2222) Imagine the humility and spiritual growth we who have been serving would experience if we could allow ourselves the gift of being served? Both sides would benefit spiritually from the exchange of roles. Working alongside our sisters and brothers who at first glance appear so different from us, allows us to learn about each other and to discover we are not so different after all. It's all about building relationships and making connections. I believe that is what Christ's ministry is all about.

I've watched the people of this church open the doors to the Family Promise program, housing families in transition out of homelessness for a week at a time, providing meals, interacting with the children. The Staging a Miracle program, now in its third year, is another marvelous and grand way the people of FUMC reach out in a big way to folks less fortunate in the community and involve others in producing what I see as a true miracle in a musical production, but more importantly it is about forming relationships. Now some of the families that we once served are members of this congregation serving others and giving back out of gratitude for what God is doing for them.

Others in this congregation have trained as mentors in another program serving homeless families: the Faith and Family Initiative spearheaded by City Councilman Rob Fong. This church provides rent subsidies and mentors to a family for about 6 months as they get reestablished in their lives. Again not only are those we serve changed and renewed, but the mentors who interact with them are also renewed in their own spirits. The object of all these programs is NOT to get people into the pews of the church, but simply to love them as Jesus loved. There is room for more people to get involved in all of these programs or others here in this church. So if you are interested, please ask. There is always more we can do. Mission is not what happens inside the walls of 21st and J Streets, but church happens outside in the community and around the world. John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement

said, “The world is my parish.” The core of his belief was to go out to the poor neighborhoods and serve the people.

I’m excited about the interest shown in the United Methodist Volunteers in Mission opportunities. This is one way to take the church outside of the walls of 21st and J Streets. There are places in our own country and around the world where teams of United Methodists go to work with the local people on projects such as cleaning up after flood waters destroy a neighborhood, teaching vacation Bible school to local children, building a parsonage. But what is more important than the actual hands-on work is the connections between people of totally different backgrounds and cultures. In my two mission trips to Bolivia many years ago, it was my joy to interact with the local villagers, to laugh with them, work alongside them, cry with them, and pray with them. It was truly a transformational experience for me.

How do we prepare ourselves for such incarnational work of the gospel of Jesus? In the scripture passage read this morning, the apostle Paul reminds us that in Jesus the barriers of separation between us no longer exist. At that time, every morning Jewish men would pray and thank God they were not born a Gentile, a slave, or a woman. Now clothed in Christ, there is no longer a wall between Jew and non-Jew, male and female, higher class and lower class. The things in which we may judge others and judge ourselves do not matter when we are living the life of Christ. It doesn’t matter what kind of vehicle we drive, or whether we walk or take the bus. It doesn’t matter if we live in a mansion or a tent. It doesn’t matter if we speak eloquently or not. It doesn’t matter in which neighborhood we live, or what manners we use or lack, or what language we speak, or what music we listen to, what age we are, the color of our skin, or whether we are gay or straight. We are all one in Christ, sisters and brothers, children of God. All of us, no matter our station in life or our outward appearance, are loved by God. To quote Marcia McFee, “God loves you and there’s nothing you can do about it!” It’s our job, as followers of Jesus, to make sure everybody knows this. We need to affirm that for each other, that’s why community and relationships are so important to who we are.

We all have hidden prejudices and judgments, I know I do, but the point is to be willing to let God work in us to move those aside long enough that we can be open to what truly is. As *The Message* states it: “Your baptism in Christ was not just washing you up for a fresh start. It also involved dressing you in an adult faith wardrobe—Christ’s life, the fulfillment of God’s original promise.” Paul tells the church in Galatia that the laws, all 613 of them written down in our Old Testament, are merely tutors to get us ready for the taking on of the adult Christ life. Once we fully immerse ourselves in knowing and living and loving like Jesus, we really don’t need a long set of laws. We follow Jesus and take seriously what Jesus takes seriously.

My dream for this church as I prepare to leave the staff and divert my energies back to the fulltime work of Side-by-Side? That you would fully clothe yourself in Christ in deeper and more intentional ways, to pray and study and breathe in the very life of the Spirit, to let it inform you and transform you in ways you never imagined. To continue to be an ever broadening community of faith, ever trusting and risking for the gospel of Jesus. That each one here, according to their ability, might find deep nourishment in worship, and courage and strength to walk out the door of the church and be witnesses of God’s love to others. Risk getting involved in places that may at first seem intimidating. Let God be your guide and Jesus your model. Be open to transformation in surprising ways. God is a god of surprises.

But don't burn out. Remember to renew your spirits and keep coming back to the well of God's grace and delight in you. Let yourself sit in the refreshing spirit of truth and light. Pray and meditate regularly, keep close to God, read the Holy Scriptures and let them speak to your heart. Open yourself and keep opening yourself and you will be filled to overflowing. God is good. The world is hard, it needs you and it needs the good news of Jesus, and you need the world. May God bless you in all you do and in all you are, and in all you are yet to be.

You will still see me sitting here in the pews on most Sunday mornings taking a long drink of God's grace, getting my wardrobe of Christ freshened up a bit for the week ahead, before I step out into God's wonderful world to preach the gospel simply by living it, this time with much fewer words.