

“WE HOLD THESE TRUTHS TO BE ESSENTIAL”
I PETER 3: 8-16

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Standing on the edge of the future is like standing alone at the edge of the sea. There are voices calling in all directions, but the light on the horizon beckons, and we must go.

For the past 54 weeks, I have lived, and moved, and found much of my being in this great community of faith. There is so much to celebrate here, that it would be easy to count our blessings, rejoice in our fellowship and let the world go away. Yet, we are called, as the old saying goes, not to sit on the premises, but to stand on the promises. We cannot simply rejoice in our past; we must embrace God’s future for our life together. Over the next several weeks, I would like to articulate a vision for Brentwood United Methodist Church.

Let me begin today by declaring some abiding principles, some core values, some bedrock beliefs that will guide us with the light from above. In times like these, we need an anchor that keeps the soul steadfast and sure while the billows roll. I would like to articulate some of these anchors. It is not meant to be an exclusive list. You may have additional thoughts of your own. Let these five things provide a foundation for the future.

We are a **Biblical fellowship**. In all matters of belief, worship and Christian life, let the Bible be our guide. The word of God does contain all things necessary for our salvation. From its Genesis stories of creation to its final revelation of Jesus Christ reigning forever and forever, we are immersed in a story of God’s determination to claim His own. If you want to understand the problem of evil, read the Bible. If you need to know that God loves you, read the Bible. When searching for guidelines of human behavior and patterns of conduct for yourself and your family, read the Bible.

Approximately 92% of American households own a Bible, yet the majority of Americans never bother to read it. Even fewer of us endeavor to systematically understand it.

In one of Jay Leno’s street interviews he asks a lady on the street to tell him one of the Ten Commandments. She thinks for a moment and replies, “Freedom of speech.” Leno asks her friend to complete this sentence, “You without sin...”

The lady responds by saying, “You without sin, have a good time.” A man passing by is asked, “Who, according to the Bible, was swallowed by a whale?” The man thinks for a moment and says, “Pinocchio.” The best seller is not always the best read book of the world.

Of course, we can know what it says, but never quite understand what it means. The Bible must be interpreted, as well as read. I know, some affirm, “The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it.” But, let us not be fooled. Even those who take the Bible most literally are selective in their literalism and often wrong in their interpretations.

Furthermore, we must see the parts of the Bible in light of the whole. Somebody said, “God got better as he got older.” Moses taught in Ex. 21:24 “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount said, “You have heard about an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth, but I say to you, if anybody strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.” Even that calls for interpretation in our day. We are a Biblical fellowship. Let that be an anchor for our life together.

We are a **Christ centered community** of faith. Now, let me be honest. In the name of Christ, Christians have done some awful things. In the name of Christ, Christians fought the Crusades. In the name of Christ, Christians have rejected scientific truths. In the name of Christ, Christians promoted causes that would cause Christ himself to shudder. Far, far, too often, we have trivialized the name of Jesus, as if Jesus were some sort of “puppet on a string” or some “buddy”

that I carry around in my pocket. “Me and Jesus got our own thing going.” “Me and Jesus got it all worked out.” Well, Christ is so much more than that. It reminds me of the story of the pastor who began a children’s sermon by saying, “Guess what I have in this paper bag? He lives in the woods, but sometimes visits our yards. He has a big, bushy tail and likes to eat nuts. His favorite past time is jumping from tree to tree.” Johnny spoke up and said, “I know the answer is supposed to be Jesus, but it sure sounds like a squirrel to me.” Sometimes Christians need to repent of what we have done to Christ.

Nevertheless, we voluntarily stood before God and a congregation of people and made a sacred promise. We said that we confess Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior and that we would pledge ourselves to His kingdom. A Savior is somebody who does something for you that you can’t do for yourself. Martin Smith was a 33 year old professor at Cambridge University. He loved kayaking in southern England. One day when he was kayaking, his kayak capsized in treacherous waves. Clinging to his craft and reaching for his cell phone, Martin managed to call his father who was thirty five hundred miles away. His father, in turn, called the Coast Guard who sounded the May Day. Within twelve

minutes, a helicopter arrived to rescue Martin from the waters, for which he was deeply grateful. When I read that story I thought about an old song we used to sing in the church:

*“I was sinking deep in sin, far from the peaceful shore
Very deeply stained with sin, sinking to rise no more
But the master of the sea, heard my despairing cry
And from the waters lifted me, now safe am I.”*

“Love lifted me, love lifted me, when nothing else could help, love lifted me.”

Peter writing to persecuted Christians in the early church said, “In your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord.” Let us be reminded today that we are a Christ-centered community of faith. Let it be an anchor for our days ahead.

Let me say, in addition, that **disciple making is our purpose**. Disciples are our product. I was flying to Kansas City a number of years ago, when I found myself on an airplane sitting next to a big man. He was much bigger than I. We struck up a little conversation and before long he asked that proverbial question, “Exactly what do you do for a living?” I’ve never been real sure how to answer people at that moment. I’ve always been tremendously tempted to play with them a little bit. You know, “What do you do for a living?” “Well, I bury people week after week.” “What do you do for a living?” “Well, I get up and speak twenty minutes and it takes ten people to carry the money to me.” “What do you do for a living?” “I’ve got a cushy job. I speak a little once a week and people pay me for it.” But, this guy was big and so I decided to be honest. I said to him, “I am a United Methodist Pastor.” He became white as a sheet. I thought he was going to faint. When he finally regained his composure, he looked at me and said, “You know, I have never been in a church in my life except for a wedding or a funeral and there’s a question I always wanted to ask a pastor. What on earth do you do, anyway?” I fumbled for an answer. I wish I had a second chance. I wish I could look that big man in the eye today and say, “I’m in the business of producing faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.” That is why we are here. We must understand that together. You see, a disciple is a follower, a learner, a lover. A disciple is an apprentice, an adherent, a student, a supporter, a devotee.

I believe in building a church on the principle of easy entry, and high expectations. I know you can do it in a variety of ways. I know you can set up lots of hoops through which people need to jump in order to become a member of a community of faith. Today, I prefer to offer you a different kind of church. I want a fellowship that is easy entry and high expectations.

Whosoever will; let them come. Jesus did not put a lot of qualifications on following. Peter, John, Bartholomew, Nathaniel, “Just come on. Let’s go. We’ll talk about it, just come on. Come on and follow. You know, just do it. Start walking.” You want to enter this fellowship? Just move with it. But, let me be perfectly honest with you. We will settle for nothing less than helping you be formed in the image of Jesus Christ. This same Jesus began saying to people, “If you want to be my disciple, then deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me.” It was the same Jesus

who said to people, "You have got to reshape your mind and your thoughts." And it was the same Church who began to say, "Let this mind be in you, which was in Christ Jesus, our Lord." It was the Church who said, "Let the peace of Christ rule in your heart even as I have loved you. So, learn to love one another." It is here in the text that we read together today, "Let them keep their tongues from evil and their lips from speaking deceit. Let them turn away from evil and do good. Let them seek peace and pursue it, for the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are open to their prayer." Easy entry. High expectations. We are in the business of producing Christian disciples. Let it be an anchor for our lives.

Let me say a fourth thing. We are **Wesleyan in our theology**. It has been said that he never had an original idea in his life. At best, he was a folk theologian popular among the common people. He would rather synthesize than ostracize any day. He promoted and was criticized for the high idealisms of Christian perfection. But, however you want to explain it, all that we believe today in this far removed congregation, is the lengthened shadow of an 18th Century priest of the Church of England by the name of John Wesley.

He gave us a number of things; let me mention two. He gave us a deep belief in warm hearted religion. For thirty five years, he searched for peace with God. I think the search hasn't changed. I sense people today are searching for peace with God.

He tried to find it in strict living. He formed a Holy Club with friends at Oxford University with such strict disciplines that their friends nicknamed them the Methodists. But that did not provide peace with God.

He tried to find it in sacrificial service. He volunteered to be a missionary to the Colonies in America, landing down in south Georgia at St. Simon's island. But his meticulous practice, including the barring of a spurned lover from Holy Communion, got him kicked out of this country with a lament "that I, who went to America to convert others was never fully, myself, fully converted to God."

Then, on May 24, 1738, John went very unwillingly to a Bible study on Aldersgate Street and as he says it, "About a quarter before nine, when the leader was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ and in Christ alone for my salvation and an assurance was given me, that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death. No longer was I a servant, I became a son."

And in that Wesleyan Spirit, we believe in a God of love, not a God of fear. In that Wesleyan Spirit, we believe in a life of grace, not a life of guilt. In that Wesleyan Spirit, we believe in the assurance of salvation, not anxiety about eternity. In that Wesleyan Spirit, we believe in the Holiness of gratefulness, not the earning of spiritual merit badges. Mr. Wesley gave that to us.

He gave us the catholic spirit, catholic with a little c, a sense of universalism of Christ's body. It means, my friends, that we're not against any other community of faith. It means that we want the Baptists, and the Presbyterians, and the Church of Christ, and the Roman Catholics to do well. We believe their baptismal waters are valid and we welcome them to dine at our tables of Holy Communion.

"As to all opinions that do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think," said Mr. Wesley. I know we have been criticized for that. "You can believe anything and be a Methodist," our critics like to say. But, let us not be misunderstood. To think and to let think is first of all a charge to think. But, it is also a deep understanding that great minds do not always think alike. As we chart our course together, and see the days that are yet to come, let us hold on to the anchor of our Wesleyan theology.

One more thing. We are **United Methodist in our connection**. Let me make a confession. They say it is good for the soul. For over thirty years, I have carried on a love-hate relationship with this denomination of ours. I get so impatient with its imperfections that it is often hard for me to affirm its strengths. It is much, much, too set in its systems to suit me. Yet, I recognize that those very systems have given me opportunities of ministry far exceeding my wildest dreams. I have carried on for a whole lifetime a lover's quarrel, but don't let anybody tell you otherwise, it is a lover's quarrel I have with this denomination of ours. I am an inside participant not a sideline observer. While I think much needs to happen to reform the Church for the 21st Century, I am convinced more than ever before in my lifetime, that we have the genius of spiritual leadership for the world in our day. You see, for the sake of the world, we have got to reconnect this connection. This is no time to take your marbles and set

is no time to take your marbles and set up your own game in some corner. Something happened on September 11th that transformed the way we must see our life together on this planet. We need each other. Even more, the world needs our unified and single witness. When I think about being deeply connected to ten million United Methodists in 165 countries around the world, who gather for worship in 41,000 churches, my heart leaps with joy. When I think there are another 15 million who have the common ground of Methodism around this globe, my mind begins to dance with the possibilities of leadership in this fractured, world of ours. It is time to reconnect the connection in powerful ways.

This is no day for rugged individualism. These are days for unusual cooperation. As I said last week, the world is our parish. Indeed it is.

So, in times like these, we need reliable anchors. We must be able to give a reason for the hope which lies within us. My prayer is that these essential truths will help to ground us, providing a launching pad, a firm foundation for our future together. This, my friends, is my prayer. Amen.