

Shiloh United Methodist Church

Ephesians 3:14-21
Mark 1:29-39

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Road to Shiloh: Drawing Closer, Praying Closer

Ephesians 3:14-21 Common English Bible (CEB)

¹⁴This is why I kneel before the Father. ¹⁵Every ethnic group in heaven or on earth is recognized by him. ¹⁶I ask that he will strengthen you in your inner selves from the riches of his glory through the Spirit. ¹⁷I ask that Christ will live in your hearts through faith. As a result of having strong roots in love, ¹⁸I ask that you'll have the power to grasp love's width and length, height and depth, together with all believers. ¹⁹I ask that you'll know the love of Christ that is beyond knowledge so that you will be filled entirely with the fullness of God.

²⁰Glory to God, who is able to do far beyond all that we could ask or imagine by his power at work within us; ²¹glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus for all generations, forever and always. Amen.

Paul is writing in this passage to let the Christians at Ephesus know that to do God's work they will need to be strong. He wants them to know that they will need to embrace God's love and Jesus' teachings if they are to support their community with God's fullness. That they will need to trust they do not know everything they need to reach people with God's love, but that God will help them grow into this knowledge, because Paul believes Christ love is to be offered freely to all people, and at the end...for all generations.

When Shiloh was a new church for each event people would bring their own silverware, because the church did not yet have a set. Bring your own cutlery BYOC could be found in announcements and bulletins reminding people to bring these important items to community events. People for years would still be find bringing cutlery, even when they did not need to out of habit, because they were used to the church working that way.

One of my friend's was driving down a freeway in southern California and passed by this huge monstrous church. When he got to his hotel he looked up which church it was. I on the other hand would have known the church

because my home church, when we moved into our new building in Helena, Montana, had members ridicule the use of the new projection screen because we would too much like the Crystal Cathedral.

In its early days the Crystal Cathedral would have several thousand in worship each Sunday. This building is made almost entirely of glass and was a state of the art worship facility for the congregation, and is still beautiful. However, at the time my friend drove past the facility the primary worshipping congregation no longer used the building, they were a few hundred strong meeting in a local school gymnasium. Instead Chinese Roman Catholics now used the facility.

Some would call this a failure, however you cannot deny that the congregation of the Crystal Cathedral changed lives. Instead perhaps we should understand it like the BYOC time of Shiloh, bringing cutlery to Shiloh events, and the community of the Crystal Cathedral had their time and place.

When I got out of Seminary and finished my formal education as a pastor, I remembered how annoyed I was by the number of articles posted almost weekly on Facebook about the “decline of the church.” As if the world hadn’t already seen that Christian churches in the United States were seeing their numbers decline. My same friend who saw the Crystal Cathedral did some research and I think his explanation about the cultural trend away from church was the most helpful for me. (You can find copies in the back of the church of this article or go here <http://www.wholechurch.org/youre-not-crazy-easier/>).

In the article my friend pointed out that in the 1950’s there was a time when President Dwight Eisenhower essentially said, “To be American you should go to church.” At the time we were in the Cold War and this tie of patriotism to church going did have an effect. Along with this effect the Baby Boom saw family sizes grow considerably. When a family came to church they brought the whole group with them.

It was in the 60’s, 70’s, and 80’s that we can see the massive church growth. Take even our own United Methodist Church’s in Billings. First saw its growth, Evangelical built a huge education wing, Grace and Hope UMCs were planted, and then last came Shiloh just toward the end of the church going boom.

In the 90's and up until now we then saw large jump in the number of people who do not go to church. The church has referred to this as decline. In some cases that is true. In the census people mark their religion and one of the categories is "spiritual not religious." That category in the last five years has jumped from 19% of the population to 25% of our population.¹

Getting people to come to church has gotten more difficult. The generation after the baby boom largely rejected church because we became too institutional, and didn't really offer a way of learning faith practices, instead we focused on making a show of worship and how big our Sunday schools could be. The following generation hasn't been to church because their parents didn't go. So, now we have to be like Paul, and Jesus, we have to let people know why faith in God and practices of Jesus following matter and will make a difference in their lives.

The other thing that is surprising is that people are scared to walk in our doors. It may be a shock to a lot of us, we are kind people, why would they not trust us. Some have been told we judge, others just don't know what to expect and so out of fear never cross the threshold of a church's doors.

One of our own congregation, has offered to have me tell her story of coming to Shiloh, to help us understand this:

When I first worked up the courage to walk through the doors of SUMC, I was reeling with some major, negative and painful life occurrences. I knew I desperately needed to reconnect with my faith and wasn't quite sure of where the

¹ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-not-religious/d>

“right place” would be.

Even though I'd grown up in the Methodist church, it was daunting for me to consider a new congregation. It had been many years since I'd been in a Methodist church, as I'd been married to a Catholic who didn't desire joining or attending a church of my faith. Throughout our marriage, we visited innumerable churches, trying to find “our” church home. Those years brought awkward conversations and inquiries. The straw that broke our search was an interaction with a non-denominational church where we'd been stopped at the doors on our way out and asked to fill out a survey of our interests and desires in finding a new church family. The form we filled out was six pages long and while leaving, my then husband was frustrated with my having completed it as he said he just knew we'd be the “new target” of their outreach efforts. He was even more frustrated that I'd given our “real” names, numbers and addresses and while I understood his concern, I told him I couldn't provide false information while in a church!

Two nights later, his assessment proved correct when five people from that church knocked on our door. They continued to call and show up, unannounced, on several more occasions, until we finally stopped answering and at one point, hid in our living room where they couldn't see us through the windows.

So here I was, a few years later. In Billings, recently divorced, away from my hometown and knowing next to no one. I was feeling intimidated by being an “outsider”.

I drove by Shiloh UMC every day for two years and sat in my vehicle in the parking lot before service began for two solid Sundays before I worked up the courage to attend an actual service. Part of my struggle came from the recollection of close-knit relations at the Methodist church I'd grown up in. It felt odd to be walking in all by myself, without someone to

sit with or call by name. And that first Sunday, when we shook hands and welcomed one another, I about bolted. I felt even more awkward as people all around me shook hands, gave hugs and had short little conversations.

Now those who know me will say I'm not a shy person. They'd be wrong. It's only when I get to know people or feel comfortable in an environment, that I speak up.

So after that first worship, I returned home, convinced I wasn't going to go back. The structure of service was a little different, the shaking of hands seemed too collegial and I was scared enough to think I could never fit in here.

So I skipped the next Sunday's service. And the next.

And on the following Tuesday afternoon, someone knocked on my door. I had no idea who she was or what she wanted so I willingly opened the door. And there stood Marcy. With a huge smile and a lovely little gift bag that I soon discovered held the best bread I'd ever had.

She didn't stay long. I didn't feel trapped. She just simply introduced herself, said she'd seen my name on the Fellowship pad and had looked for me to formally welcome me and had missed me the past two weeks.

She didn't talk about how great the church was or anything that would've made me feel like I was on the receiving end of a well-rehearsed "sales pitch". She just smiled, said it was lovely

meeting me and wanted to give me her homemade bread, which she hoped I liked. She then said she'd love to see me again and invited me to if sit with her anytime at church.

And there it was!! Unsuspecting, I'd received the "golden ticket" - an invitation from someone who BELONGED! It was like being invited to join a special club!

I did show up that next Sunday, with a thank you for Marcy - her visit and the bread. And I did sit with her. And even called on before my first few "SUMC outings" where I was joined by a new friend, who introduced me time and again to other new friends, and new opportunities to share and belong in the SUMC community.

Brandy's story is not an original one. Some of the people who have visited Shiloh since I have arrived have shared similar stories with me. We aren't scary, but it is harder than you might think to learn to become a faith community and it is harder than it used to be.

When they were trying to decide whether to install roundabouts along Shiloh Road, people were skeptical that it would relieve congestion or even be a good idea. People shared statistics, animations, but the advisory board working on the project was still not convinced. Until they did a live test. The planners took a parking lot and build a roundabout and showed with live vehicles how the flow of traffic would improve. Imagine that for a minute, a parking lot with people watching how cars move. A recent report showed that average travel speeds on Shiloh were 37 MPH and the longest line at busy times is about 8 cars to get into the roundabout, and even that is rare. As I have heard from many of you, traffic is better on the roundabout.

And it didn't end there after the roundabouts were installed in took videos on how to use them and lots of patience with people who were frustrated and even 8 years later, people are still struggling to learn them. Here is a video I found on how to use the roundabout....

Did you catch the part about emergency vehicles. Get out of the roundabout, I honestly did not know that until I watched the video. It makes sense if you are at a traditional intersection and an emergency vehicle comes you clear the intersection to let them past, but it was a new way of thinking that I needed help with.

So, I have been thinking, as a Pastor where do I get to set up a parking lot to demonstrate how new styles of church, discipleship, mission can help us understand how to get church working again. I have been mulling it over or the video to help understand how to use the new roundabout of faith. Then I ran into a young adult who used to go here, but left during one of Shiloh's challenging times and she said something that was astonishing. She said she loved her time at Shiloh, that it felt like Shiloh was headed to share God's love in great ways, but things fell apart. She shared with me some great success she has at her church now, and said, "I think we didn't pray enough, especially together."

Mark 1:29-39 Common English Bible (CEB)

²⁹After leaving the synagogue, Jesus, James, and John went home with Simon and Andrew.³⁰ Simon's mother-in-law was in bed, sick with a fever, and they told Jesus about her at once.³¹ He went to her, took her by the hand, and raised her up. The fever left her, and she served them.

³²That evening, at sunset, people brought to Jesus those who were sick or demon-possessed. ³³The whole town gathered near the door. ³⁴He healed many who were sick with all kinds of diseases, and he threw out many demons. But he didn't let the demons speak, because they recognized him.

³⁵Early in the morning, well before sunrise, Jesus rose and went to a deserted place where he could be alone in prayer. ³⁶Simon and those with him tracked him down. ³⁷When they found him, they told him, "Everyone's looking for you!"

³⁸He replied, "Let's head in the other direction, to the nearby villages, so that I can preach there too. That's why I've come." ³⁹He traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and throwing out demons.

Did you catch that, after all Jesus had done he was getting popular. Then he did what Paul was doing for the Ephesians he knelt in prayer. When the disciples came to Jesus they said, "Look there is a crowd over there, let's keep this thing that is working going." Instead Jesus points

them the other direction and invites them to follow God's call together instead of the world's call.

If we go to our history, Brother Van, a Methodist circuit rider who helped plant hospitals like Billings Clinic, one of the schools that became Rocky Mountain College, many churches in Montana, and started an orphanage often prayerfully pointed the other direction before people were ready. When he saw a need for an orphanage in Helena, Montana it was said he as a grown man was crying on the conference floor for funding, because he believed so deeply. The orphanage became Intermountain Children's home.

Or take for example one of our members who has been praying recently:

Darlene Newstrom has served as our Mission Committee chair this past year. She was struggling with the role because she never felt she fit in, or that she was doing it right. One night in December she was in prayer and she was seeking a way to offer service to the church and to God.

She of course said it had to meet certain parameters, "I had to be good at it, know how to do it, have an easy source and be fill a need for someone." She said the idea came to her, but their were obvious pitfalls, "She wasn't good at it, she didn't know how to do it, the source of the goods wasn't clear, and she had no idea of the need." Darelene describes the nudge from God to be too great to ignore.

Darelene knew she was being called to make a specific thing, but again it seemed it might not happen because there was no pattern. After hunting, getting one, getting the wrong size, reworking it, she finally got the pattern. Then after a final fix came to her in prayer, she was off. The mittens started to take shape and pair after pair formed together.

Then the idea came to call the HUB downtown and actually see if there was a need. Darlene just couldn't and kept sewing mittens. Then after 9 pairs she started to doubt they would have a need, and finally decided to call. Carmen who is the saint at the HUB picked up the phone. Darlene said, "Do you need mittens for people?" Carmen said yes and then said, they had sent 4 people to the ER just that week with frostbite on their hands. Darlene asked shyly, "So 10 pairs, 100 pairs, 110 pairs?" Carmen responded, "110." Darlene inquired if Carmen was just saying that because she offered the number and then asked Carmen to give a number for the need. 200 mittens is what Carmen said they would need.

Darlene got off the phone and doubted, where would she get the material for 200 mittens.

She then met with a group of her friends, who Darlene described as non-church goers, agnostics and atheists. She was sitting with these 4 women and shared with them her dilemma and her sense of call, bemoaning the idea of where the material would come from. They sprang into action telling her about Goodwill buying and then they organized a cutting party for the following Saturday.

Then Darlene was talking to someone at work who is going to start a second group of mitten makers, and just happens to be going to Seattle where there is a Pendleton wool factory and is going to see if they will donate.

Darlene is not to 200 yet, but they are on their way and she eyes every piece of wool she sees. So be careful what you wear to church. She needs more wool if you have it.

Darlene shared from this experience "God is good, God is listening, I am thankful."

Prayer is key and hoping God will provide is key and as if God knew that for this sermon, Barry Padgett contacted me. The founding pastor of this church and I think I will let him close this sermon.

I was reading the pastor's corner for this week and was thinking again about the early days of Shiloh. I remember we called ourselves the "church without walls", a sort of play on the fact that we didn't have a building. The idea was that this was a place for everyone to feel at home. We didn't carry it as far as we should have (It was a long time ago,) One of my biggest steps was using inclusive language all the time, especially in reference to God. Well okay, not the Lord's Prayer but everything else. It was somewhat of a challenge for people way back then.

I realized early on that Shiloh was a place where people could come no matter what they're background. We had people from every possible religious background, from Mormon to fundamentalist to Episcopalian. We had so many former Catholics that acceptance of every Sunday communion was an easy step. At least 70% of our people had not been active in a church for awhile when they came to Shiloh, and some never. That is when I realized we needed to print out the Lord's prayer every Sunday in the bulletin. There was more than one person in church who did not know it when they started coming to church.

We are called to be a people of God reaching new people, serving all creation, and most of all praying together. We are loved by God and God has us here for a reason. May we be brave enough to learn the roundabout of our faith and help others learn how to use it.

Shalom my friends, and Amen