



BIRMINGHAM FIRST

A UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

“NO LONGER STRANGERS AND ALIENS!”

Rev. Gary Haller
First United Methodist Church
Birmingham, Michigan
November 6, 2016

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands—remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. (Ephesians 2:11-22)

Sixteen years before Michigan was admitted as the 26th state of the Union, when Michigan’s population was 8,767 and before John Quincy Adams was inaugurated as the sixth President of the United States, First Methodist Church was taking shape. Meetings were held at Willits Tavern in a town called Piety Hill, later known as Birmingham. The year was 1821.

Worshippers met in barns and homes and were visited occasionally by a Methodist circuit rider who journeyed into town on horseback. The first church building was built in 1839 at the corner of Merrill and Bates Streets, the present site of the Baldwin Public Library. It was a great undertaking for the 37 members. The issue emerging on the national scene was slavery.

On November 2, 1873, the Birmingham Methodists moved into a new brick church located at the corner of Maple and Henrietta Streets. It was worth \$20,000. There were 141 members.

In 1939 our church became known as the First Methodist Church, a name which would continue for 39 years until 1968 when we became the First United Methodist Church. By 1946 the congregation had grown to 634 members. “Now we shall build again” became their slogan.

In January 1951, the church property near Henrietta was sold and a five-acre site was purchased in the fields at the corner of Maple and Pleasant Streets. On Christmas Day 1950, ground was broken for this new church facility. The cornerstone was laid on April 15, 1951, and the congregation moved into the new structure on September 7, 1952. Consecration services were held on October 5, with Bishop Marshall Reed presiding. It was the culmination of nearly eight years of labor and sacrifice and six building fund crusades.

Each generation has added something to this foundation and steeple. With each generation has come controversy, change, a different church for a different neighborhood, a different world. In 1957, ground was broken for the Chapel of Prayer, now called the Runkel Chapel, together with the west educational unit, additional offices and the Choir Room.

The Chambliss Outdoor Worship Center was dedicated on June 16, 1974. During the 1990s, an elevator was installed, and our many gardens landscaped. On September 29, 2002, on the 50th anniversary of the move to this current building, ground was broken for the Christian Life Center. In 2005 we completed a renovation of the Sanctuary with a marvelous new organ. In 2012, the South Wing was renovated and made accessible.¹

Through the years there have been many pastors: Runkel, Thomas, Wright, Ward, Ritter, Harnish. Several different hymnals have graced these pews, an air conditioning system, a new sound system, old windows replaced, old doors repaired, displays installed for the great Wesleyana collection, a second site now beginning in Berkley, mixing the new with the old, as if to say, “It’s not finished yet!” And we’re not finished building this church.

To those of us here, this is sacred space. And every church community has sacred space. As you reflect back upon your years—churches which nurtured you, summer camps you attended, cathedrals which brought awe to you in your far journeys, perhaps a storefront where you met Christ—all of these places have been sacred space.

This All Saints morning, we remembered and honored 33 members who were part of the warp and woof of this community of faith. We read their names which are listed in the bulletin. For them, this was sacred space—and by their prayers, their presence, their gifts, service and witness, they helped make it holy.

For Jesus, of course, the holy of holies was not a building, but the human heart. Jesus became angry when he saw the way the Temple in Jerusalem had become an obstacle rather than a doorway to people’s connection with God. As precious and holy as that space was, it was not nearly so holy to him as the hurting people around him who needed God’s guiding love. And

what troubled Jesus most in his homeland was that here, in the holy land, even in the shadow of God's house, the people were "like sheep without a shepherd."ⁱⁱ

So many people were struggling in isolation and abandonment, victims of religion and social circumstances. And instead of finding the love of God in a healing community, they were made to feel ashamed of their sinfulness, unworthy of God, and cut off from the congregation. In the competitive environment of a pretended holiness, it didn't take much to cut you off. Illness, immorality, poverty, victimization, the wrong race, the wrong gender, the wrong accident of birth, the vagaries of human existence—you name it, and you were disqualified from participating in the congregation. But Jesus couldn't stand to see a single soul lost, left out, or disregarded.

To make matters worse, their religious leaders taught them to hate people who were different, people from other nations, other races, other religions. As Ephesians suggests, Jesus did not come to build walls between people but to bring them together into God's presence. So he built a new structure, not made of bricks and mortar and wood and stone, but of human beings. The foundation is not cement but the apostles and prophets. Its purpose is to bring all people together into God's presence. We read in Ephesians:

So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.ⁱⁱⁱ

The church is a building made of human lives, its foundation made strong by the sacrifice of those who have gone before, its contemporary members shaping the steeple to point all people to God. And like any building, a foundation with no continuing structure is just a hole in the ground, and a tower without a strong foundation will soon fall. We need both to be a church. The foundation is the heritage handed to us by our forebears, through the long history of the church Jesus started, and including those who have served here since 1821.

The foundation is our faith, our trust in Christ, our knowledge of scripture, our discipleship in Christ, and our commitment to holiness and an ethic consistent with our gospel mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

The steeple is our ministry, our continuous aspiration for God, our consistent action in caring about people in ways that point them to the Savior. It is a beautiful human structure, and the Bible says, Christ loves it.

We love our sacred space. But what is truly sacred here is not the building, but the people—the people who have gone before us, the people who serve here now, and the people who will come after us to finish the work.

The book we're reading in our Wednesday morning Arbon Dennis study is Tony Campolo's *Following Jesus Without Embarrassing God*. In it, Tony tells a story about Clarence Jordan, renowned founder of the inter-racial Koinonia Farms in Georgia. In the 1950s when racism and discrimination were still rampant in the South, Clarence was invited to preach a revival in a backwoods Baptist Church. When he went out of the platform to preach he was amazed to find the congregation of several hundred people was thoroughly integrated. White and black people were seated together all over the place.

Right after the service, Clarence got the old hillbilly preacher who pastored that church and asked him, "How did you get this way?" "What way?" said the preacher. "Racially integrated!" answered Clarence. "Come on," he said, "You know that to have a racially integrated congregation like this is really unusual down here in South Carolina. Tell me how you got it this way!"

"Well," the preacher said with a sly smile, "this church was down to just a handful of people when the last preacher left, and they couldn't get a new preacher no how. So, after a few months, I told the deacons that I'd be willing to preach for them, and they let me do it."

"The first Sunday I preached to the people, I preached on how everybody becomes *one* in Christ Jesus. I told them that, with *real* Christians, nobody pays any attention to things like the color of people's skin. I preached that not to be one in Jesus was not to be Christian."

"After the sermon, the deacons called me into the back room and told me that they didn't want to hear that kind of preaching no more!"

"What did you do then?" asked Clarence.

"I fired them deacons!" the old preacher shouted back. "I mean, if deacons ain't gonna 'deac' like the Bible says, they ought to be fired."

"How come they didn't fire you?" asked Clarence. "They never hired me!" was the answer. "Well, when I found out what bothered them people," continued the old preacher, "I gave it to them every week."

"Did they put up with it?" inquired Clarence.

"Not really," answered the preacher, "I preached that church down to four. But after that, we began to pick up new members. We wouldn't let people into membership unless they were really Christian either."

"How did you know if people were *really* Christians?" asked Clarence, really intrigued by this.

"That was easy," said the preacher. "Down here, from when we're knee high to a grasshopper, we're taught that there's a difference between black folks and white folks. But when people become Christians, all of that stuff is forgotten. In Jesus, we overcome all that racist evil, and we work hard at becoming *one* in Christ."

After the service, Clarence went home with a university professor who drove forty miles to attend that church. As they rode together in the car, Clarence asked the man, “Why do you go to that church? Why do you listen to that preacher! He can’t utter a sentence without making a grammatical error. You’re a professor of English. Why would you travel forty miles just to go hear that man preach?”

The young professor answered with measured words, “I go to that church because that man preaches the gospel!” Instead of experiencing death, the church experienced resurrection. That’s the kind of God who is at work here.

Still at work here, because we’re not finished building this church, are we? The world is not very different from when Jesus came: people “harassed and helpless,” like “sheep without a shepherd,” and too many places which are supposed to be God’s doorways building walls to shut them out instead?

Isn’t the vision of this kind of church worth the work to build, especially in our day? Don’t you want to be a part of it, a part of God’s enduring temple, a spiritual hospital reaching to the next generation?

It’s All Saints Sunday. We don’t just honor saints past, we’re also here to open our doors to those God can yet make into saints. Will you help me find the people who need our ministry? Will you help me find the people who need to be here to help us? Will you join me in proclaiming the love of God in Jesus Christ for all people with every ministry and every program and every communication of our church, with every fiber of our being? Then let’s build God’s church here, shall we? Amen.

-
- i. This historical information is from our church website: www.funcbirmingham.org/welcome/our-history/
 - ii. Mark 6:34.
 - iii. Ephesians 2:17-22.