

THE MESSAGE for May 1, 2011

John 20:19-31

Future Church... Our Commission

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- Take yourself back to the early 1960's...
- Elizabeth Taylor and Audrey Hepburn are fashion icons.
 - Martin Luther King, Jr. is *TIME* magazine's man of the year.
 - President John F. Kennedy is assassinated.
 - Kodak introduces the Instamatic Camera.
 - Beatlemania begins in earnest with the songs *I Want to Hold Your Hand* and *I Saw Her Standing There*.
 - A loaf of bread costs \$.22.
 - A gallon of gasoline costs \$.31.
 - ZIP codes are implemented for the first time.
 - The lava lamp and the ubiquitous smiley face make their first appearances.
 - And Friedens Lutheran Church in Myerstown has a new church building on the corner of Locust and Washington Streets – 10 times larger than the previous building

WOW! Things have changed in the last 50 years. By show of hands, how many of you were active in this congregation when we moved into this building in the early 1960's? WOW! Thank you! Thank you for your commitment over the years.

Look around, things *have* changed! Myerstown has changed! People have changed! The church has changed! The world as we know it has changed! And will continue to change. Life will never be like it was in the 1960's. That's neither good nor bad. It just is.

So I wonder, how might we change for the sake of our future? We can't change the past but we can prepare for the future. Change is coming. The future is coming. The question is how will we respond?

Believe it or not change is as natural as life itself. We humans anticipate change. We plan for it. How many of you ever bought a new car? We could talk about buying cars but that's a topic for another time. The future is coming so we must continually ask ourselves, "What will happen if...?" or better yet, "How can we make *it* happen?" Whatever it happens to be.

Today's reading from John's Gospel shows us how the world had changed for those early disciples and how they responded to it. Jesus was dead and then rose from the grave. For the disciple their world had been turned upside down, radically changed. They were living in fear for their lives and rightly so, hiding behind locked doors, so they wouldn't end up on the cross too. They were supporting one another and trying to make sense out of the changes that had occurred. Jesus was alive, then dead and alive again.

Then the unthinkable happened. Jesus appears to them, speaking peace to their fears, blessing them with the Holy Spirit, and sending them out into the world to do what he was doing. And they go. They go out into the world, to share God's blessings of unconditional love and forgiveness in the world. The Jesus' Movement had started. And the world hasn't been the same since.

That's what we are called to do. That's what we are commissioned in Baptism to do, to go with an unchanging mission, participating in the Jesus' Movement, sharing God's blessings of unconditional love and forgiveness in the world. We exist to change the world with God's love and forgiveness. It's a simple yet powerful strategy.

In the 1960's, churches simply needed to put out a church sign, build a building in a good location like this, offer traditional ministries and people came. Churches grew. Churches were the center of many people's lives in the 1960's. But that all changed.

The world changed. Myerstown changed. People changed. The church is no longer the center of people's lives. That's neither good nor bad. It just is. So there is no need for blaming or finger pointing here. That won't help. The point is, God is up to something in the church and in the world and God is calling us to be up to something in the church and in the world too.

I believe people today – young and old – in the church and outside the church want to be a part of something important. I believe people of all ages want their lives to count for something. I sure do. Don't you?

We are spiritual beings and I believe people are turned off by any institution that's not outwardly-focused. The church is to be God's vehicle for making this world a better place with God's love and forgiveness.

In other words, we are to reach more and more people with God's grace. That's why we built this building 50 years ago. Times had changed and our ancestors wanted to change with the changing times – or they wouldn't have built this building. This building was built for ministry of the 1960's. Our God-given mission will never change but how we accomplish that mission will always change.

You might be asking then what won't change? Here are at least four things that won't change.

1. Our theology... that goes like this. God is good. **All the time.** And all the time. **God is good.** This will never change.

We won't be good all the time but God will be. That's why our theology is grounded in God's grace. *We are saved by grace through faith* - through faith in Jesus. There is nothing we can do to earn God's grace. Thank God for that! Hence we rely on God's blessings everyday. We are blessed by God to be a blessing to others. This will never change.

2. What we say and do is all about our relationship with Jesus or it's about nothing at all. This will never change.

Jesus is making all things new in this world and the next. In Jesus, God is reconciling not just some people, but *all* people. In Jesus, God says, "I know you fully, I love you completely, and nothing will separate you from my love, not even death itself." In Jesus, God is making all things new. This will never change.

3. The Bible is our guide for life with Jesus. This will never change.

WARNING: Reading the Bible will change your life and your view of it. We want more people to be reading the Bible regularly, and to let it guide their lives. When we read the Bible we grow as disciples, our souls are fed and nurtured, our minds are shaped and renewed, and our hands and feet are strengthened for mission and ministry. This too will never change.

4. Some churches believe it's important to have all the answers. We are not one of those churches. If we had all the answers then we wouldn't need Jesus but we do. This will never change.

Here at Friedens we are comfortable living with faith questions that go unanswered. That's because we are so anchored, so secure, so shaped by God's love that we welcome faith questions. We don't look for easy answers. We're Lutheran! (That was a joke...) We will certainly have our differences and that's okay because we continue to seek a deeper understanding of God's dream for us and our future. This will never change.

Some people have this weird idea that I'm only interested in growing this church bigger and bigger. I am not! I'm not interested in growing this church at all. I am interested in growing people who live their lives for Jesus, people who are committed to his radical movement to change the world with God's love and forgiveness.

That means our words and our actions matter. Our words and our actions in the church and outside the church ought to reflect the words and actions of Jesus, who we say is our Lord and our Savior. So dream with me...

- Picture a vibrant church shaped by its past and living for the excitement of the future.
- Picture a church so alive in the work of the Holy Spirit that lives are being changed by the grace of God.
- Picture a church where peace and love and forgiveness are common occurrences.
- Picture a church so filled with God's blessings that we can't wait to share those blessings with others.

How is such a church sustained? By practicing the following:

First, pray. Pray for our future. Pray that God will send us out from here to be a blessing to others. Pray that God will reveal how you can take a more active part in the mission and ministry that God is calling us to do.

Second, worship. Continue to make regular worship a priority in your life and invite others to come too. In worship we celebrate what God is doing in our lives. In worship we gather to support one another and be equipped for living the faith in the world.

Third, connect. LIFE Groups provide the environment for making connections with other disciples here at Friedens. If you haven't experienced a LIFE Group, consider joining one. You'll be glad you did.

Fourth, serve. Find a need and fill it. No matter how much or how little time you have, find a way to get involved in the life of this congregation beyond worship. Jesus said he came to serve and not be served. He calls us to do the same.

Fifth, give. For our generous givers here at Friedens, thank you. Thank you for your support and commitment to our mission and ministry in this place. Faith is what makes the church possible, not money. Money is simply the tool we use. Our faith guides our giving. So consider this: *our standard of living should not determine our standard of giving, instead our standard of giving should determine our standard of living.*

Pray, worship, connect, serve, give...

The world has certainly changed since the 1960's, but the mission and ministry God has given us here at Friedens haven't changed. The way we accomplish our mission and ministry will continue to change.

My dream is that 50 years from now, some pastor will stand up, perhaps in this very spot... It won't be me because I'll be 97 years old. My dream is that he or she talks about how Friedens is a thriving faith community because we were committed to living the faith in the church and in the world today. So be it for Jesus' sake. Amen.