

I love parades. Do you? One of my favorite things to do holidays is to watch the parades.

A number of years ago, a beautiful float in the Tournament of Roses parade suddenly sputtered and quit. It just stopped. Frantic technicians scurried about trying to figure out what was the matter. No one could be sure. Finally, one of the people watching the parade laughed and said, "Check the gas."

The technicians checked the gas and guess what? The float was out of gas. The whole parade came to a halt while someone fetched a can of gas. It was extremely embarrassing to the owner of the float. Does anyone want to guess who owned the float?

It was the Standard Oil Company. With its vast oil resources, its truck ran out of gas.

Isn't that delightful? I suppose it is as long as you are not the Standard Oil Company and your float has just run out of gas on national television. Amidst all of the distractions of getting ready for the parade, they forgot to do one of the most important things, check the float for gas.

Unfortunately, Standard Oil Company, isn't the only one's who get so busy, so distracted taking care of other important things, that they forget to check the gas. In our lives, if we are not careful, we can allow ourselves to become so distracted with life, with work, with stuff, that we forget to connect with God and refuel our spirits. If we are not careful, we can easily let the busyness of life distract our growth in faith and connection to God. Has that ever happened to you?

Because that has happened to many of us and because that has happened in churches before, we are taking time to remind ourselves during the month of June of our Mission Statement. If you would please turn to the beginning of your bulletin. Let's read it together: *The Mission of Sun Prairie United Methodist Church is to invite and welcome people to be committed and compassionate followers of Jesus Christ through worship, through spiritual growth, through fellowship, through service to others.*

We are focusing on our mission statement so we can remember who we are and who God is calling us to be. Two weeks ago, we talked about the importance of welcoming everyone, even people who are different from us. Last week, we talked about the importance of worship and how it reconnects

us to God. Today we are going to focus on the importance of spiritual growth and fellowship. These are actions that connect us in the church to each other. These are commitments we make to help each other connect with God and grow in faith.

So often when churches talk about mission statements, long time members of the church begin to say something like, "Well, our church doesn't care about its members anymore. All they care about is getting new people into the church." Have you ever heard anyone say that before?

My hope is, that we will take our mission statement so seriously, that we will see what is really here. Of course there is a commitment here to reach out and share our faith, the hope that is within us with new people. But there is also a commitment here to live out our faith by helping one another commit to staying connected to Jesus Christ and growing in our faith. *We need each other, to grow and develop a healthy faith.*

In our scripture for today, Jesus is teaching in his home in Capernaum. So many people gathered that no one could get in or out of the house. But a group of people had a friend. That friend couldn't walk. He must have had an injury of some kind and was a paraplegic.

Now they had heard how Jesus could touch people and heal them. They may have even known people who had been healed by Jesus. So they brought their friend to him, thinking that Jesus could do something for him.

When they got to Jesus' house, they found so many people that they couldn't carry their friend to Jesus. What did they do with that challenge? Did they give up and go home? Did they turn to him and say, "Sorry life is so tough for you, there is nothing more we can do. Take care of yourself?"

No, they figured out a way to get him to Jesus. They ripped out the roof of Jesus' home, and lowered him down in front of Jesus. And the scripture tells us that *When Jesus saw their bold belief, he looked at the paraplegic and said, 'Son, I forgive your sins.'*

Jesus was able to touch this man, because his friends cared enough about him to bring him to Jesus. Who has cared enough about you to pray for you? Who do you care enough about to pray for them? Who have you invited to worship? Who have you checked on, who may need a word of hope and grace?

You see, one of the roles of the church, is that we are to care for each other. We are to stay connected with each other, to help each other connect with God and grow in faith. That is why we are in the process of starting small groups in the life of this church. It is the major way we can help you connect up with each other so that you can help each other connect up with God and grow in faith.

It is not only the role of the paid staff, to help us grow in faith, it is each one of our roles, to help others grow in faith. If you see someone hurting, be Christ to them and touch them. If you see someone lost, be Christ to them and invite them to Church. If you see a member beginning to move away from the church, be Christ to them and ask, "What is going on?"

In the early Methodist Movement, the church was a lay movement. People gathered in small groups of 4 - 10 and in those groups that met each week, they asked each other questions that indicated what was happening Spiritually inside of each member. They held each other accountable in healthy ways that helped to bring out the best within each one. The early Methodists were dependent upon regular worship and regular attendance of a small group to help each other connect with God and grow in faith.

Are you willing to become a part of a small group? Are you willing to care for others and allow others to care for you?

The very best history of our faith tells us that to be healthy, we can't be lone rangers. We need each other. We can learn from each other. We can help each other. Are you willing to work with others for your own growth in faith?

Whatever you are facing on this day, I believe God is giving you the ability to deal with it. That doesn't mean God is asking you to do it alone. God wants to help you. Are you willing to trust God, take responsibility and walk with God to face the challenges of your life?

Max Lucado tells of a Labor Day weekend in 1979 when he was on the Miami River, trying to figure out the best way to protect a houseboat he had just purchased with three other college age boys. It wasn't much of a vessel. It was, at best, a rustic cabin on a leaky barge. But it was their home while they were in college. And they, along with other residents of south Florida were preparing for Hurricane David to descend upon them. They knew that if they didn't do something their home would end up at the bottom of the river.

None of these boys had ever lived on a boat before, much less weathered a hurricane.

But they bought enough rope to tie up the *Queen Mary*. They had their boat tied to trees, tied to moorings, tied to herself. When they were through the little craft looked as if she'd been caught in a spider's web. They were so busy tying her to everything they could; it's a wonder one of the guys didn't get tied up too.

They had owned this boat for three months and they didn't want to sacrifice her to a hurricane. All they could think of is to tie her down. Then Phil showed up. Phil knew boats.

Max described Phil as a man who knew so much about boats, that he was born wearing a suntan and dock-siders. He spoke the language and knew the knots. He also knew hurricanes. Word was that he had even survived a hurricane for three days in a ten-foot sailboat, and that made him a living legend.

Phil said, "If you tie her to land, you'll regret it. Those trees are gonna get eaten by the 'cane. Your only hope is to anchor deep." He said, "Sail out into the middle of water, place four anchors in four different locations, leave the rope slack, and pray for the best."

Anchor deep. Good advice. They took it. We can too. At some level this scripture invites us to look at ourselves, to compare ourselves and how we handle challenges to those friends who brought the hurting man to Jesus. Trust God, do what we can with what we have, work together. It is what we are called to do, because it is what will help us to anchor deep into the love of a God who sees you even when the storms of life are blowing around you. Anchor deep and place your hope and trust in the one who wants to carry your burdens.

Amen