

What a joy and privilege it is when brothers and sisters in Christ gather to worship the living God! This is church! Today's we conclude our ALL IN Stewardship Preaching Series, And my sermon title was "No Strings Attached."

Well, living true to that reality, I had no Strings attached to that title... So Its Gone! A new direction came forth from the HS after the bulletins were printed, so we're keeping it simply "ALL IN".

Over my lifetime as a disciple of Jesus Christ, I've worshiped and been connected regularly with 73 UM Churches! 9 Methodist churches from childhood, college, seminary and adulthood—Where I was a lay member or served as a pastor, and 64 UMC's I supervised, resourced, preached & taught for 7yrs as DS. I praise God for the gift & joy & blessing it is to be part of such a diverse church as those called United Methodist.

Each one of those 73 churches represented different contexts I have had the privilege of being a part of: Big ones, small ones; urban, country & suburban ones; Multicultural, as well as the rich breath & depth of theological belief. And friends, each & every one, without exception, All praising God & serving our Lord thru-out all the communities of NJ And Bangor, ME where I lived 3 years during seminary.

Each church uniquely serving God...Each one trying to imagine what it means to be the Body of Christ, His hands & feet; his voice & ears; His legs & heart...To become something more... To imagine God sized dreams...And to unleash the Holy Spirit's power to transform the world. Each one finding ways to RISK going ALL IN for the Lord.

You know this too my friends, right? Some of you have been involved in many churches over your lifetime...For some this is the only church you've been a part of...And you know over the years how much this one church Has gone ALL IN decade after decade after decade.

From going ALL IN moving the church from downtown to this more residential neighborhood.

From building a new sanctuary to going ALL IN offering multiple worship styles...

From dreaming and building a new education wing to becoming a reconciling community of faith...

THIS CHURCH—First UMC of Moorestown has **risked** imagining what it means to be the Body of Christ, for the **Common Good** of all...dreaming God-sized dreams and went ALL IN. Even up to this very moment...as our church council unanimously affirmed our new mission and 5 yr vision statements...we keep imagining what it means to be the living Body of Christ—His hands & feet; his voice & ears; His legs & heart...As we LOVE GOD ~ REACH PEOPLE & SERVE ALL.

Friends, how we do this as a church, in all our beautiful diversity, is so important...because as Pastor Jess said so powerfully last week: Each and every one of you & me are unrepeatable miracles of God...Filled with grace, gifts and possibility...unlimited possibility...Individually & collectively as the unique Body of Christ here at 1st Church.

This is why we selected today's Scripture reading from Acts To conclude our ALL IN Preaching and Stewardship series. It comes just after the gift of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples gathered and which we celebrate as the birthday of the church. On that 1st day of Pentecost, about 3000 were baptized as followers of Christ. The verses that immediately follow are a description by the author of Acts as to how the very first church DID "church". Now most scholars believe Acts was written about 80AD by Luke who wrote our 3rd Gospel; who was presumably a Gentile Christian.

Luke is helping his readers, his communities to know how to remain Faithful to tradition, while reinterpreting it for their NEW circumstances. He's giving pastoral advice & guidance to a rapidly changing faith community and world. One that was more and more Gentile, and increasingly growing beyond and distancing itself from Judaism.

Followers of the Way, Disciples of JC, were adapting, being resilient, & discovering new ways to become something more for Christ That was relevant for their communities, their towns, their context. So hear from Luke, the Author of the Acts of the Apostles—The first description of how the very 1st Church did Church in 80AD:

Hear the Word of God from Acts 2:42-47

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.

Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the good will of all the people.

And day by day, the Lord added to their number those who were being saved."

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

For these early followers of Christ, the church was not just a place to **GO**—it was something you **DO**. Do you hear the difference? The church was not just a place to GO—It was something you DO.

My friends, just imagine...What if Church was a verb? Verbs are words that convey action or a state of being...doing. This passage defines the very first church—and did you hear all the verbs? Devote, prayer, gather, believe, eat, share, distribute, praise & grow.

It was all about “being” the church—being ALL IN—it was Christ’s Holy Spirit in action, alive & well.

Disciples gathered, they ate together, they shared all things in common,
they gave so others could have; they prayed,
they followed Christ’s teachings,
they gathered in the temple & they gathered in each other’s homes &
they gathered in the community,
they were generous in all things...and
they grew in the number of those being saved.

This is love in action...Christians in action. This is going ALL IN...people, this is Church! Oh my friends, what if Church was a verb? Not a place we go...but something we DO. A way to BE in the world. Imagine that! God’s love in action everywhere—not just within these walls here At First Church and not just on Sunday live streamed or in person—but every day, in every place, in all ways—God’s people “DOING CHURCH”

Now, we know that buildings provide home bases for countless ministries of the church,
~especially as we worship together each Sunday morning...
~as we live-stream from this space & we join with you at home or wherever you may be when we gather together virtually.

**But we also know that the church cannot be defined by the height of its steeple, but by the reach of its people...

**Not by the number of pews or online views, but by the number of lives changed and renewed.

**Not by the style of music that is played, but by the joy that comes thru The unforced rhythms and harmonies that break forth in our praise.

The church cannot be defined by the shape of its doors, But by the disciples that **pass through them—as they **head out** into the world...to make a difference in Jesus’ name.

My friends, WE are the church that reaches out and builds community.

- You are the church—in your schools and colleges.
- You are the church—in your homes and on your block.
- You are the church—in your office and while on the job site.
- You are the church—in the grocery store and on the ball field.

If we really lived as though church were not just a place we GO, but something we DO—what a difference we would make for the Kingdom of God. And you know, its all about how we live together and how we make community.

Some years ago, I received a gift that was quite powerful for me that I think is a great illustration of what I'm trying to say this morning. It came from Jill Mayo who was the preschool director of St. Andrew's UMC in Cherry Hill at the time. She's the sister-in-law of our own Dan Mayo btw... We're just so connectional as Methodists!

It's a cool little postcard titled, "How to Build Community"; but it also speaks to understanding church as a verb. Verbs of action and doing and being to make a difference in the world by starting with the little things that present themselves.

~The very first words of advice are: Turn off your TV. I love that! Did you know the average American watches 5 hrs of TV a day? 5 hours! And that's not including other streaming devises! My friends if we were to do this one simple action: Turn off the TV—Imagine all the hours that could become available to BE the church in our own home!

- More time with your kids, your partner, your parents, your grandkids
- More time in personal devotions with God.
- More time for self-care.
- More time with friends.

Oh, lets turn off the TV!

~Another action of Spirit-filled love on the card was to "Know Your Neighbors." What would that look like in this little corner of Moorestown, Or Mt. Laurel, or Delran, or the town where you live? Remember we KNOW that 6 out of 10 homes on our blocks Have no church they call home...How can you go ALL IN And know your neighbors?

We get some advice on how to help us do this on this awesome card, we should: Greet People. Play Together. Open your Shades. Sit on Your Front Stoop/Porch. Plant Flowers.

Or here's one I love to do: Look Up When You're Walking or *jogging*. I enjoy getting out, & have been walking more than jogging these days. When walking the loop that goes along Strawberry Lake Park, I love saying "Good morning or Good afternoon!" and smile. And you know what...people respond, they look me in the eye, they smile, and I've come to see some of the same people week after week, Our own little community of health enthusiasts, sharing Spirit-filled love, Just through eye contact, a smile, and hello.

~And there's more Verbs that can build up relationships making a difference for mercy & compassion included on this card of practical wisdom: Bake extra and share. Ask a Question. Listen before you react to Anger. Help Carry a Heavy Load. Share your Skills. Seek to understand, learn from new and uncomfortable angles. And how about this one...Know that no one is silent, though many are NOT heard—Work to Change it.

Oh my brothers and sisters in Christ, how would 1st Church be different if we really lived as though our "church" was defined by its actions & its spirit, rather than by its address? A church recognized by the community because we go ALL IN for our Mission Statement: Love God ~ Reach People ~ Serve All? Do you hear the VERBS? LOVE—REACH—SERVE!

What would a world fraught with fear of terrorism, political unrest And acts of violence against strangers...neighbors...Look like if we really lived our mission statement As a church defined by its actions & its spirit! What if church was a verb? Not just a place we GO...but something we DO; every day, in every way, in every place possible.

This morning these cards are available for each one of you to take home. They will be available from an usher as you leave...Cards filled with words of action and love—to help build community within a hurting and needy world. I invite each of us...to take a card as a challenge to be the church in action, with Spirit-filled love in real & tangible ways...as we go forth into the world. Everything from: Turn off the TV to Singing Together to Take a Child to the Park.

And you know what...Words that echo the actions of the very 1st Church in Acts are found there too: Share What You Have. Have Pot Lucks! Play Together. Ask for Help When You Need It. Mediate a Conflict.

We...are not so different from the first Century church—For all who believed would gather together—in temple & at home & the community, sharing all things in common. Breaking bread, giving to those in need, praying & praising God and having the good-will of all the people...the common good of all...ever before them. This is what it means to DO CHURCH.

And if we take this challenge my friends, If we risk going ALL IN...we will be defined not as the big church on the corner of East Camden and Pleasant Valley Avenues; But defined as the people of God who are relevant for these unprecedented times, a church with a big, giving heart for service to ALL; who reach People in the name of Jesus; because this is a church family who loves God by word, action & deeds.

Oh siblings in Christ, We will not be defined by the number of pews or online views, but in the number of lives changed and renewed. We will not be defined as contemporary or traditional, but as a joyous, Spirit-filled family of faith. We will not be defined by the shape of our doors, But by the disciples that pass through them—As we...each and every one of us...head out into the world to make a difference in Jesus' name. Just imagine what God is calling us to DO and BE!

My friends...Let's RETHINK CHURCH—Just open up your imaginations... What if Church IS a verb? Not just a place to GO...but something we DO?

BE THE CHURCH...All you Saints of God.
Be ALL IN! Amen and Amen!