

We the People

Pastor John Blossom - July 2nd, 2017

We are here to rejoice and be glad that we have a living God who loves us, cares for us, and is with us right now, and forever. That's always something to celebrate with joy and thanksgiving!

It is such a pleasure and a privilege to be serving as this congregation's new Pastor. I am excited for our church, our community, and everyone who we can touch together through faith. Whatever our stories might have been, we have a new chance to live a new story together - God's story. Whatever we think or feel about the world, this city, or ourselves, God is present and alive today to help us think and feel differently about everything, and everyone. Whatever hope we thought was dead, gone, and buried, God is here to help us to feel Easter sunlight and Pentecost fire in our hearts, and to see the new things that God is ready to bring to life in us. Welcome to the church of God's possibilities - welcome to South Meriden Trinity United Methodist Church!

It is my special privilege to be welcoming you today, this very special day in American history. Today, in 1776, our Declaration of Independence was approved by a vote of the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. John Adams, who would become our second President, voted that day for independence, and he was sure that the July 2nd would be remembered with great joy. Adams wrote in a letter to his wife Abigail, "It will be celebrated, by succeeding Generations, as the great anniversary Festival...the Day of Deliverance...from one End of this Continent to the other, from this Time forward forever more."

Of course, things didn't turn out the way. Instead, we celebrate the 4th of July as our day of independence from England, the day when the Declaration of Independence was signed and first read aloud in the streets of America. So, the 2nd of July was an important day, but the people of our new nation had not heard that we were a new nation.

And what did it mean for us to be a nation? After the War of Independence, we found out pretty quickly. As a nation, we were a mess. We were in deep debt. Our government was in chaos. Each new state went their own way, and there was little cooperation. There were rebellions for economic and civil rights, and George Washington had to lead troops to suppress them. We were a nation, but we were not a people, united with a common culture and purpose. We were a work in progress, at best.

In 1792, our new Constitution emphasized the purpose of being a work in progress. It starts with these well known words, written by Thomas Jefferson: "We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union..." Our purpose, our "in order that," was to get better at being a united people, instead of being just another nation; and not just an everyday unity, a MORE PERFECT unity. We aren't supposed to settle for being a second-best people: we are to strive to be the best people.

Here we are, more than two hundred years later, still learning how to be a people. We have learned,

as a nation, that there is a price for becoming a people. It is a price measured in blood, sacrifice, and painful reconciliation. It was only after the enormous violence of our Civil War, fought while this church was being founded, that people no longer said, "The United States are," but said, "The United States is."

In the trenches of World War 1, on the beaches of Normandy in World War II, in the hills of Korea, in the jungles of Vietnam, in the dust and the mountains of Iraq and Afghanistan, and in the streets and in the homes of our own nation, blood has been shed, again and again, as we have tried to learn, again, and again, how to think, feel, and act like a people who strive for perfect unity. And what we have discovered, again and again, is that it is not enough to form a more perfect union as a secular people. What we have seen, again, and again, is that the sense of sacrifice, the sense of devotion, the sense of giving for a greater cause, the sense of our real value, requires us to dig deeper into our hearts, and to find a greater principle to organize our lives. What we have felt, again and again, is the heartache of knowing that our living, and loving God, knows how far we have fallen short of God's perfection, a God who taught us, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that being God's people requires our deepest devotion to treating our families, and our community, as God's world, and the world as God's community, and God's family.

Today's lesson, from the Hebrew Bible book of Genesis, shows us how much our living God is willing to do for us to lead us towards this perfection. Abraham, from the tribe of Noah, was chosen by God to be the father of many nations loved by God; but only one of those nations would be God's covenant people. And although Abraham and his wife Sarah were old beyond measure, without a child, God blessed them with a son Isaac to fulfill God's promise. Abraham did nothing to deserve these gifts of grace, except one thing: he believed in God's promises. He believed that God's story would become his story. Abraham rejoiced in God's bounty, and yet there came a day when God had to help Abraham to understand just how much faith it would take for his story to become God's story. Genesis 22 says that Abraham responded immediately to the living God's call to him: God said "Abraham!" Abraham said, "I'm here." God asked for Abraham's undivided attention and devotion, and Abraham offered it immediately. He was ready to do God's will.

But God's will that day was unlike anything Abraham, or anyone else, had ever known before. God calls Abraham to kill his only son Isaac as a completely burnt offering to God. People of all nations sacrificed children before and after this, even among the people of Israel, but never had God asked someone to offer up their child, a gift from God, to complete destruction, for God's sake alone. God wanted Abraham's perfect obedience and devotion to God, nothing more, nothing less.

Abraham said nothing. He just obeyed God. He went to a mountaintop with Isaac and some servants, gathered wood, tied Isaac up, and prepared to kill him and burn him. It seemed to be the complete destruction of not only Isaac, but of everything that Abraham had hoped for. All of God's promises for children, who would be God's people, were about to be destroyed. Abraham's story was as good as dead, dead because he loved God, and trusted in God, and wanted God's story, and God's story alone, to live.

It was then, and only then, that God intervened. It was then, and only then, as Abraham was ready to plunge his knife into the heart of all his hopes for his future, that the angel of God, the God of absolute love, and power, and glory, the God who wants nothing more and nothing less than complete and perfect redemption for all of creation, it was only then that the living God's angel whispered, gently, softly... "Abraham? Abraham?" It was only then, when Abraham's heart was absolutely, completely, perfectly devoted to God, that Abraham could finally reply to God's call in complete truth, "I'm here!" I'm here. I'm here. I'm completely in your hands, LORD. I love you above all else, no matter what. I am finally, truly, ready to live your story, and only your story. I am ready to be your people, and yours, alone.

And it was in that moment that God showed us the meaning of mercy and grace. Our loving and giving God gave Abraham a sheep for sacrifice, a sheep from God's own bounty, God's own gift to us as a sacrifice of grace, a hint from the living God of how God's one and only Son, Jesus Christ, the lamb of God, would be God's gift of grace for all time, for hearts that surrender completely to God's story, hearts that seek a more perfect union with God and God alone, to be God's people, and God's people, alone.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, it is with profound gratitude for the grace and mercy of our living God that I have come to serve you, our community, and the world, in Christ. Our new Bishop, Thomas Bickerton, said to clergy being appointed this year that our churches are bases of operation for The United Methodist Church, to move into our communities, to serve them and the world in the grace and the mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I am to lead you in worship, in prayer, and in service, but most of all, I am to lead you out from this building into the hearts and minds of the people of South Meriden. We are to bring the hope and the salvation of the living God to people whose lives are being sacrificed in the fires of hopelessness and sin.

We are to affirm the reign of the kingdom of God over heaven AND earth, in fellowship with all of God's people of faith, in order to form a more perfect union, the one truly perfect union that can reign forevermore. We, the people of South Meriden Trinity United Methodist Church, are to make South Meriden's story God's story, and God's story South Meriden's story. God has called us to this, just as God called out gently to Abraham, so that we may respond to God, with open minds, open hearts, and open doors: "I'm here."

Your church is here, God. Your church is here to obey your call, and to move into the world to bring your grace to everyone who needs it. And, like Abraham, we will not hesitate for one moment to respond to God's call, as we invite God's possibilities into this world. After our worship and fellowship today, I invite you to join us in a short prayer walk around our community. It will be a short journey, a few small steps towards living God's story together with our community. I pray that it will not be the last journey, as we, the people of South Meriden Trinity United Methodist Church, become we, the people of God, for the people of South Meriden, with the people of South Meriden, and with all of God's world.

Amen.