

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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**“Building on a Firm Foundation:
1. Lighting the Church”
A sermon by Mark E. Diehl**

**30th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)
October 26, 2014
Psalm 90:1–6; 1 Timothy 6:11–19**

The language of our scripture passage from 1 Timothy challenges the church. The words prod and push and unsettle the listener. “Pursue, fight, seize, keep, do.” Faith is not some laid back, relaxed philosophical enterprise. According to 1 Timothy, it demands engagement and response.

For the Christian faith, this incarnation of involvement and incitement to invest one’s life into others has always been true, even when Christians have wished it otherwise. From the apostles encountering the risen Lord who directed, “Go and teach and baptize” to later disciples whom the Spirit impelled to disperse into the world, to the faith communities addressed by 1 Timothy, the church has always been called to action. And this Reformation Sunday reminds us that the people called to action are not a special class of priests or religious types but every person.

During the early history of our country, settlers made their way into new territory across the North American continent. They built homes and farms and shops and roads; they founded trading posts and communities and schools. And always the impulse to worship and serve God found its way to expression. It may not have been easy or convenient, but the inner dynamic of faith demanded an outward expression of it.

Sadie Blount Blacknall, one of the earliest historians of this congregation, wrote about the building of the first sanctuary here in the spring of 1876.

As soon as the roof, weatherboarding and floor were in place, we began to worship in our little sanctuary.... The window openings were boarded in, planks were laid across boxes and trestles for seats; a fruit crate on end with a piano cover spread over it furnished a pulpit. A Methodist neighbor lent a Family Bible for the first meetings, and the congregation picked its way through the unlighted village streets on preaching nights, each family carrying a lamp from home to light the church.

Can you imagine that scene? The darkness and cold of early spring nights with families traversing unpaved and unlit roads head to church with lamps and children in hand.

I know how challenging it can be for us to make it to church each week. I put down the paper or my iPad and climb out of my La-Z-Boy recliner. I choose one of the cars to drive, and on the way decide between Starbucks or Dunkin' Donuts for a latte. I hope I won't have to park too far away from the entrance. Will it be too hot or too cold this morning in the sanctuary? Maybe they will sing some hymns I know. Is that interim minister still there? Lord have mercy, what's taking them so long? Maybe the service will be over by noon so I can see the pre-game show.

Do you know that for some folks today, it remains a challenge to participate in worship?

It might be a physical disability. Imagine taking two-and-a-half hours to get ready for church instead of 45 minutes. The sheer determination of buttoning a shirt, of pulling on a pair of pants, getting out of the house and into a vehicle. They have to plan ahead and get an early start. I can barely get here on time, and they are here with a smile on their face attending to responsibilities! And they do it week after week after week.

For others, it's a challenge to participate in worship because to do so is to risk arrest or persecution. We forget what a privilege it is to worship and express our choice of faith freely. It is easy to take it for granted.

Back in 1876, they picked their way through the unlighted village streets, each family carrying a lamp from home to light the church. What a powerful image!

It is powerful because of the commitment and resolve of those people to express their faith. And it is powerful because it reminds us that the church is not a building, it is not a facility. The church is *the people* who carry a lamp to light the way and to brighten a room referred to as a sanctuary. That sanctuary is not the church. The church is women and men and children. The church is you and me.

One legacy left for us by previous generations is that of shining a light as the church, whether it is convenient or not, whether it is easy or arduous. “How is our light shining?” Are we carrying a lamp to light the darkness and to illumine a path through this world?

Last night I was attending a dinner with several members of this congregation. Even after a year, I’m still meeting folks and visiting with them for the first time. One person in particular spoke with me about some events from their life and what it meant to them, and in that sharing, I was encouraged and found hope for my own struggles. That person was shining a light.

That person was not intending to encourage me. Out of the unassuming experience of an ordinary life, that person shared a richness that brought light to another.

It is so important for us not to denigrate what we can do and be as ordinary persons. All of us struggle. It may be a husband whose job is in jeopardy, a single mother doing the very best she knows how to do, a person with an unidentified health concern. Who of us does not need some light shining on our path? Who does not need a word of encouragement for the unseen battles each of us is fighting internally?

The Apostle Paul wrote, “For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake. For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” (2 Corinthians 4:5–6)

An interim time in the life of a congregation provides the opportunity to look back, to see where we've come, to understand what lessons have been learned, to stand in awe of the grace-filled moments that have sustained this community of faith along the way.

Here is a little of what I have learned about First Presbyterian Church in my sojourn here:

- This congregation was one of the first in our denomination to insist that women had legitimacy to be in positions of leadership and gifts to offer.
- Racial barriers began crumbling here long before it did in the culture surrounding it.
- This congregation made a commitment to the urban poor and the heart of the city by maintaining a presence and dynamic ministry in this location. They decided to bloom where they were planted.
- An African community settling in Durham found a home here and established a vibrant life of faith that has enriched this congregation.
- The presence and giftedness of LGBT members is celebrated as they are embraced as sisters and brothers in Christ.

The legacy of this congregation is rich because First Presbyterian has built upon a firm foundation. That foundation is not concrete and stone, brick and mortar, inanimate objects without life. It is built on life itself, life that moves and acts and intercedes and responds and engages.

What is the foundation upon which this congregation is built? First, upon Jesus Christ: his incarnation of action and his continuing involvement in this world through the power of the Spirit through and beyond the church.

The foundation of this congregation is built upon the history and life and faithfulness of people who have served God sacrificially in their day and age.

The foundation of this congregation is built upon core values that guide the living and doing of faith today. Those core values have been reaffirmed recently in the Mission Study Report that is coming to the Session.

What are those core values?

- **Reformed Worship** that invites all in creative and faithful ways to focus heart and soul and mind to the glory of God.
- **Diversity and Inclusivity** in our community that is consistent with God's remarkable creation and re-creation through baptism.
- **Faith Exploration** that encourages the discovery of discipleship and questions of faith on our journey with the Risen Christ.
- **Pastoral Care** that shares God's love and our compassion as we nurture each other in mind and body and spirit.
- **Historic Placement** that reflects the decision by this congregation to remain committed to demonstrate God's love and justice in the heart of Durham.
- **Social Mission** that responds to the cries of the poor and the need for justice, remembering Jesus' promise to be found among the hungry, the homeless, the sick, and the imprisoned.
- **Faithful Stewardship** that responds to God's investment in us through our own generosity and hospitality and faithful ministry.
- **Community** that reflects the hoped for and anticipated beloved community where we are affirmed and challenged and find joy together as the Body of Christ.

I believe those core values are consistent with the early community of saints here at First Presbyterian who carried a lamp to light the church. Those core values are consistent with the words in 1 Timothy to prod and push and unsettle us so that we will "pursue and fight and seize and keep and do."

I ask you to continue the deep and faithful tradition of this congregation, to step up and be God's light and love in this community and world.