

Meditation “Foundations of Faith”
Youth Sunday
Sunday, March 4, 2018
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Springfield, IL

Five years ago, when I was a senior in high school, I stood in this pulpit and spoke of the tremendous change I had experienced during my time in Westminster’s youth group. I fondly reminisced on the many pastors who had nurtured my faith, from Shelly to Tasha to Pastor Z who served as Interim Head of Staff my senior year. While I was certainly worried about my upcoming transition of moving away from home, as I know our beloved seniors will soon do, I also knew that this church would remain standing and ever present for the generations that would come behind me. I’d like to take a moment to share a few lines from my previous sermon, written by my 18-year-old self:

“This interim period has taught me to appreciate what I truly love about this church – the family, our love for God, and the fellowship among us. These things will never change, no matter who our head of staff is. Our pastor is like our shepherd, but we, the congregation, are the heart and soul of this church”

I’m struck at how relevant this still is today. As the Interim Director for Youth, my title suggests change, of moving on, of short-term impact just for the time being. Now that my life is in transition once again, I’d like to take a moment to reflect on the idea of stability, the foundation of this church, which is strong enough to support those of us who come and go.

As we read in our first Scripture reading today, the 10 Commandments provide the framework for a continued and everlasting relationship with God; a covenant between God and God’s people that has persisted over the millennia. Covenants are like a partnership - an agreement between two people, or entities, where they make promises and commitments to each other. The idea of a covenant is not a novel concept – we see them scattered throughout the Old Testament. Like a handshake, it requires two willing partners, one to make an offer, and the other to accept it. God makes a promise to Noah to never again flood the world after being reminded that his creation was inherently good. As Dr. Kieffer reminded us last week, God made a covenant with Abraham, that God will bless Abraham and his family, if Abraham will be faithful to God. In the case of the 10 commandments, God make a covenant with Moses on behalf of the Tribe of Israel. God asks the Israelites to obey his laws, and the Israelites commit to following these rules. In return, they will be God’s chosen people. This partnership does not have an expiration date – as God’s people, we are called to fulfill this promise still today. God has shown us how to live, extending the offer of undeserved grace and unconditional love. God’s promise for us is an invitation that will never be rescinded, the best offer we could ever hope to receive. This love means we have the opportunity to enter community with God, from everlasting to everlasting.

God’s love, his end of the offer, is the cornerstone for our foundation of faith. We were given the 10 Commandments, written on stone, to be the bricks which make a foundation strong. Imagine God’s hand, always reaching out to us, never failing through the rainstorms, the floods, the tornadoes and tumultuous times in our lives when our faith is shaken.

We know the basic tenets of the commandments: Honor your father and mother; do not steal; do not take the name of the Lord in vain. Pretty good advice, I'd say. These rules exist to keep us stable, in line with God's desires for us all while preparing us to be God's disciples in the world. To follow them requires a mental and physical response, a way of living that is reflective of the wonderful gift of life we've been given. But what the commandments cannot do is touch or change our hearts or our very beings; they cannot touch us deep inside where we hold love, hurt and longing. This kind of emotional, spiritual response requires an investment of our whole lives and a community to hold us accountable to our promise when joining the church to be an active disciple of Christ.

This is where we, the congregation, come in. Every time we take Communion together, as Jesus instructed over 2000 years ago, we join in this great community of faith that transcends time and distance, and takes us back to the original promises God made so long ago. In times of bountiful harvest, we gather to give thanks. In times of struggle, we gather to lean on each other and to pray for one another. Theologian Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove offered his viewpoint on spiritual security in his book The Wisdom of Stability: Rooting Faith in a Mobile Culture. He says, "Stability is a commitment to trust God not in an ideal world, but in the battered and bruised world we know". I might venture to rephrase this statement, to reflect the world I know of late. Stability is a commitment to trust God in a world of mass shootings, in a world where bomb threats cancel school on a not-infrequent basis. Stability means believing in the hope for a brighter tomorrow, it means listening to the youth who push our country towards a more peaceful, stable society.

God doesn't promise that an idyllic world would be our reality. He doesn't promise life will always be easy, or that we will always be firmly rooted in our faith. Stability doesn't mean we can't ask questions, or struggle with doubt. What stability does mean, however, is that we must never give up. We will never be sinless; we will never cease to fall short of the Glory of God. But, we remember that God's hand is still reaching out to us, ready to help us back up when we fall. Sometimes we see the hand of God in our neighbors in the pew next to us. Maybe we find it in a home-cooked meal in Parish Hall or a particularly interesting bible study conversation. With the help of our congregation, we receive second chance after second chance to enter into covenant community with God. This is what makes our church stable, our foundation firm, and our hands free to once again accept God's grace and love.

Stability means that the doors of Westminster Presbyterian Church will always be open to us, no matter how long it's been. It means it will always be a community which makes us feel comforted and safe, much like returning home after a long day. I was baptized and raised in this church by people who called it home long before I did. Stability means that all are welcome to call it home; that this church is no more my home than it is yours, or even a friend who visits for the first time.

When I look out into the congregation, I see stability. I see my former Sunday School teachers. I see Chorister assistants. I see adults that led my mission trips as a youth. I see young families, who dropped their smallest ones off in the nursery before church began. I see parents bringing their children to church to build their foundation of faith.

What a gift this is, to be given the opportunity to grow up in the faith. Parents, your youth might not tell you this on a regular basis, but they are thankful that you invested your time and made church a priority for them before they could decide to prioritize it for themselves. You have given them the foundation they need to build their faith, a moral and spiritual foundation that will shape their lives for the better. This is a gift that cannot be repaid; it can only be passed forward. These youth will remember what an impact this church has had when they go off to college, start off on their own, and

become parents someday. They will pass on their foundation of faith when they become the next generation of Sunday school teachers or members of the choir, actively leading the church forward.

Finally, stability means the youth program didn't cease to exist when I graduated from high school. It is still here, serving a new generation of youth who call this church home. And after I leave, it will still be here. It slowly modulates over time, with the ebb and flow of community and culture, strengthened by its many volunteers and leaders. To realize the power of stability, of commitment, of those who came before us and those who are still to come is to realize that the power of God's love is our firm foundation. God's love is manifested in each of us - in the small ways we become the hands of God as we build this church community and prepare a way for the future.

I'm incredibly grateful for this congregation, which vowed to raise me as a child of God at my baptism in this very Sanctuary 23 years ago. Since then, my eyes have been opened to the ways in which our love and support foster an environment of stability, of building a foundation of faith for these youth. Thank you for your continued support of our youth programming, from the parents who cook meals to our weekly volunteers to those who commit to keeping us in your prayers. I know the future of this church is bright, because I have witnessed these youth in action. So let this be my message to you: A firm faith foundation begins with God's covenant of love, and is strengthened by the commitment of this congregation to supporting our leaders of tomorrow. Amen.