**Just Beyond Yourself** Rev. Dr. Julia A. Carlson
Fourth Sunday in Lent The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Psalm 107:1-8; Matthew 5:1-16 Saint Paul, Minnesota
March 10, 2024

I would like to begin by sharing a couple of moments from my spiritual journey. The first took place in this sanctuary back in 1983. I was here for an Easter Sunday service and as soon as the organ sounded with “Jesus Christ Is Risen Today”, I found myself choked up and tearful. I didn't understand it but couldn’t stop it. My mother asked me if I was alright and, of course, I said “I’m fine.”

I’ve worshipped here periodically through the decades since, but it wasn't until I returned to the House of Hope for an interview to become your interim associate pastor that I realized that Easter Sunday in 1983 was my first call to ministry. God had been speaking to me but I didn't know it.

Thirteen years later I headed off to Chicago for seminary. I did my field site ministry at the Rockefeller Chapel at the University of Chicago and otherwise worshiped at Fourth Church; I must confess my love affair with limestone and Ralph Adams Cram started long ago.

So, the second moment was in the sanctuary at Fourth, in the spring of my senior year, John Buchanan was preaching on the text from Isaiah where we do not find God in the earthquake or the fire, but in the silence. He remarked that Presbyterians are always full of words and perhaps we should experience silence and so after laying some ground work, he simply stopped talking.

I have no idea what anyone else in the room experienced, but I clearly heard a voice. I heard the words, “I will provide for you.” My head came up. My eyes came open and I knew this was not my own thought nor was it my voice. In the stillness, and with no expectations, I felt I'd heard the voice of God. I was going to be leaving my beloved seminary community and starting a new career as a pastor, so, within seconds, the wonder, all the uncertainties ahead of me took over and I said, “Well, what about this and this and this?” And I found out it wasn’t going to be a conversation. But I left church that day with the assurance that God would always know my needs and where to find me.

And God had to keep on the lookout, as an interim pastor. I moved around a lot. It can take years to understand God's call and it most surely takes a lifetime to live out our call. But what I find most interesting, is that after all those years of moving from one congregation to another, this call was supposed to be my stable time. This was to be the call where I worked with all the same colleagues and did the same tasks; a place to bask in wonderful music, and to stay behind the scenes, my smooth, hard-working but carefree ride.

Which is why I turned to the Beatitudes today; no matter where we are and no matter our circumstances, this faith journey includes times of low spirits, grieving, and hungering for righteousness; it means we all know the need of mercy and prayer. And now more than ever, we know the taxing burden of working for peace. God’s provision doesn’t take these away but offers us a container or crucible that will hold us and help us GO through and GROW through. We need community and sanctuary.

Long before any of us arrived here, this building already had a legacy as a house of prayer, a place of calling, and a home for the spiritual journeys of many. We have a building that preaches, it also embraces and it awes. God has faithfully provided for us and we have much for which to be grateful.

Modern culture, however, primarily links gratitude with happiness and the carefree and smooth ride but as the beatitudes remind us, blessings also come with what theologian Eric Baretto calls “sharp edges” because all blessings are mixed in with other “lived realities.” Karoline Lewis put it this way, “You are blessed. You have to hear that on the front end. And note that being blessed is not just for the sake of potential joy, but also for the sake of making it through that which will be difficult.”

This spiritual home, I believe, will always offer more potential than we think we can manage; more diversity than we can now imagine; and more opportunity for ministry than ever before. And, it will always ask for more attention, care, and maintenance than we have practiced in the past. And here is another blessing, in spite of being made from twenty-six inch limestone blocks, I feel this building is on the move, in that it is almost ready to accommodate a future we are only beginning to envision.

Today, we are kicking off our capital campaign, Bright Hope for Tomorrow, Strength for Today. You heard from Lisa this morning that it begins grounded in gratitude which in the language of our morning scripture means grounded in blessings. It’s grounded in Jesus’ sense of beatitude which has both soft and sharp edges and recognizes the mystery and power that is always here and always beyond our control! We are invited to want what God wants. This building is a blessing and a responsibility, it is a part of the work of the whole community. Since that moment at Fourth Church, I found out some things on my “needs” list for God were not needed; I found out that walking the path of engaging communal needs also met my own.

This sanctuary was completed in 1914 as war broke out in Europe; the joy of worshipping here in its glorious newness quickly moved to prayers for easing of tension, for peace, and then for sons gone to war. How many places do you know that can hold the gargantuan sorrows of human anxiety and loss and still ground the human family in love, wonder, hope, and community?

You will find the wall of gratitudes for House of Hope in the Kirk today but I also asked our officers to share what they are grateful for in life and church and this is what they said: “wonderful friends,” “a spiritual home,” “an authentic support system,” “a physical structure that supports and sustains,” and “beauty.” They too recognized gratitude for the “ancestors that built this magnificent house” and one said, in fine Presbyterian fashion, that this place gives us space to “consider faith and actions in the world in a larger theological context.” There is, another said, “something ineffably sublime [here] that is beyond description.”

Social scientist Brene Brown believes that the practice of gratitude is one of the most powerful tools we have to nurture our well-being. She recommends the practice of doing an inventory of daily blessings, no matter how small, grounds a life in real joy. “Gratitude helps us see what is there instead of what isn’t.”

According to Walter Brueggemann, gratitude or thankfulness was understood to be a synonym for praise. Gratitude “is an affirmation and response” to God’s presence in our lives and, according to Old Testament spirituality, it always included “an inventory of real-life troubles” as we heard in this morning’s Psalm. Jesus continued this message and practice right at the beginning of what is known as his Sermon on the Mount. Again in Lewis’ words, “It’s important to remember that who Jesus is simultaneously reveals who we are. For Matthew, the disciples are . . .  learners. But that learning cannot happen outside of the realm of promise. You are blessed. You are the light of the world. You are the salt of the earth. Only with these claims of identity in place can . . .  we, live out what Jesus will ask us to do” (The Working Preacher, January 29, 2017).

Blessing is a gift and a calling; Lewis is telling us that it is also a foundation. And so, we are headed into a capital campaign with thanksgiving and praise, and as the salt of the earth and the light of the world.  I think we all, members, friends, and neighbors, can make claims of being a light of the world in stained glass alone. But it is also, salt of the earth time! Most of the construction work has been in the base of the building; we have a big bill for the humble, foundational needs of heat and electricity so that ministry can continue to do ministry in every square foot of this place.

Years ago, poet David Whyte was at Hennepin Avenue Methodist for a day-long program he titled, “The Pilgrim’s Way: Setting the Direction for a Future Life.” Among the many things shared that day was David’s story of being with his friend John O'Donahue the Irish philosopher and writer who wrote *Anam Cara* and other treasures. John died in 2008 at the age of 51 and Whyte was still mourning him when I heard him speak.

In the midst of sharing ways of navigating change and trying new practices, Whyte told us about a time in his life in which he had to decide a new course of action. He was with O’Donohue, who at a certain point in all the words, worry, and complaint simply said "you have to go against yourself, David." Whyte said, “John was telling me to be more generous; to get over myself.”

In this, Whyte heard the prompt to grow, to move out beyond the smooth and the comfortable and stop letting his ego needs lead him. Years later, Whyte took O’Donohue’s words “go against yourself” and turned them into a poem he titled, “Just Beyond Yourself”; it is from his 2018 collection titled *The Bell and the Blackbird*. It begins:

*Just beyond yourself.*

*It's where you need to be.*

*Half a step into self-forgetting*

*and the rest restored by what you'll meet.*

*There is a road always beckoning.*

*When you see the two sides of it,*

*closing together at that far horizon and deep in the foundations of your own heart*

*at exactly the same time,*

*that's how you know it's the road you have to follow*.

House of Hope, “Just beyond yourself,’ it’s where we need to be.”

Swearingen and his congregation could not have fully understood the life and legacy they planted here; it was just beyond themselves–a great leap of faith. Now we have new roads to follow and a building nearly ready to lead us on. If, like me, you are here for a place to bask in wonderful music, that has been a constant. If you hope to stay behind the scenes and have a smooth and carefree ride, here’s what I have since learned to say to myself: “Buckle up, Buttercup! Because  God is providing more than you could ever name or hope for!”

House of Hope, just beyond yourself, it’s your legacy and it’s where we need to be. Amen.