

Sermon Text: Luke 4:14-21

Now at our Christian Believer class on Thursday, we were talking about how small some people make faith. You know, faith is more than just saying what you believe. Faith is what you do because of what you believe.

I want to illustrate. I found a couple of humorous stories, I think, in a most unexpected place, in an Air Force maintenance log, about the difference between saying and actually doing something about it. A pilot wrote down in a maintenance log, “Left inside tire almost needs replacement.” The mechanic signed off, “Almost replaced, left inside main tire.” I thought it was a lot funnier than that. Another pilot notes, “Dead bugs on windshield.” The mechanic’s response, “Live bugs on order.” Then a final one, the pilot wrote, “Evidence of hydraulic leak on right main landing gear.” The mechanic’s solution, “Evidence removed.”

You see there’s a big difference between talking about and actually doing something. Now, Main Street United Methodist Church is here because of doers, people of faith, who have acted upon their faith. Our church is sort of like a bucket brigade, and somewhere in our intercom system, I didn’t communicate to Emmie, it’s not just brigade, but bucket brigade. I think most of you know what that is, don’t you? Now, raise your hand if you do know what it is. Okay, about half of you don’t know what it is. Well, before there were fire trucks, when a building caught on fire, a community would gather up every able-bodied citizen into a long line, starting from some source of water all the way to the fire. They’d get a bunch of buckets. Each one would hand a full bucket of water to the next one and the next one and the next one, and the people would stay still, but the buckets would move on down until the bucketful of water was cast onto the fire to save the building. Now, think about it this way. Look around at this grand sanctuary, and truly look at it. We don’t look at it enough. You might notice that the Youth did a beautiful banner in the back there. It is a wonderful sanctuary, a wonderful, inspiring place of worship. A long, long time ago, somebody whose name is forgotten except to God alone turned the first shovel of dirt on what was to become the building site and then the foundation of this building which we’re in. People walked off the distances, and they measured, and they looked up at the sky, and they imagined, and they kicked around a few rocks here and there, from one side of the lot to the other, but there was nothing here. Absolutely nothing, but a plan, and a promise to pay.

Now, those people, that Main Street congregation of long ago kept their promise to the future, to God, and to us. They built it, and we inherited it. They built it, and we came, and we worship, and we are baptized, and we have married, and we have buried, and we have learned, and we have sung, and we have laughed and cried together here. Those people who built this building, now all gone, once considered themselves the Main Street congregation. The truth is, there is no such thing as **the** Main Street Methodist congregation. There’s no such thing! There are only people relating to God and to each other and passing through. We’re all passing through. The building, this building, remains, and the building attracts, and the beautiful tower shows out into the city, and the building is used in the building up of souls and the building up of faith and trust and compassion and the building up of relationships with God and with each other. I thank

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God that this Main Street campus, now from one side of the block to the other, is more than a dusty old field. By faith and promises kept, it has grown beyond this sanctuary and beyond the Fellowship Hall and taken over the Chipley Building and added parking and landscaping and the new Asbury Outreach Center for children and youth and generations yet unborn.

Now, nobody here remembers when this dirt that we sit upon was an open field. I don't believe anybody is that old! 1858, was it? Now, that was the original congregation, but no one remembers. No, it was 1915, Bill, was it 1915? 1917. I don't think anybody was here when they turned over the first shovel of dirt for this building, but just about everyone of us, a few are newer than that, but just about every one of us remembers when the space outside the Fellowship Hall was nothing but mud and mess and very raw potential. Most of us do remember that. Now, we stand in almost 150-year line of ever-changing Main Street Methodist congregations building up and building out with plans and promises to meet the spiritual and relational needs of people that we'll never meet. We are now making plans and building buildings that will meet the needs of people that we'll never meet! Not this side of Heaven.

You see, a good and faithful church is not a social club and is not just a building. A good and faithful church is a doorway into the Kingdom of God, and the Kingdom of God does not begin and end here. The Kingdom of God goes on forever. What we do matters. What we do here matters eternally. When we believe that, the cost in temporary terms seems almost inconsequential.

Now, there are no records of anyone regretting what they did to make sanctuary possible. There are no records of anyone asking for their money back or saying they were sorry to have been a part of the building up of Main Street Methodist Church. I pray that there will be no one here who regrets in the long run what we have already done and the good will that will come from it and the ministry and the mission that will grow out of it. My prayer is that we will truly finish the good work with as much enthusiasm as we had in the beginning.

Yes, congregations are like bucket brigades. There is a world on fire with souls scorched with loneliness and guilt and despair, and here we worship God, we study God's word, we invite whomsoever will come, and we have said, “Here we stand.” Here we stand, and furthermore, we invite others to come and stand with us. Our source of hope is the Gospel, and the power of our faith is the Holy Spirit, and the personnel in our bucket brigade, for the moment, is you and I. We are a snapshot of the ever-changing membership and personality of Main Street United Methodist Church.

The Gospel alone offers a faith that can forgive and love enemies, forgive sins with grace, not ritual, not sacrifice, but grace. That is good news for people parched and thirsting for relief and acceptance and love and peace. The world can offer many, many things, but forgiveness and grace and hope eternal come only through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

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From our Gospel reading today, Jesus stood up in His first recorded sermon, and He said, “The spirit of the Lord is upon me because He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor,” and here is the dramatic part, He rolled up the scroll, He gave it back to the attendant, then He sat down, and the eyes of the entire synagogue were fixed upon Him, and then He said, “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” You understand how important that is? He was saying all those yearnings for God to do something, all those hints and prophecies of a Messiah who would come, of God coming personally to save, all that is fulfilled, is begun right now in me. In other words, the future, which you have waited for, is now. In that synagogue, Jesus seemed to be saying in a long line of generations, you have carried the law and the prophets thus far, now the Kingdom of God, the kingdom of grace has begun in your hearing. Every eye was upon Him. The Kingdom of God has come and is still coming. There is yet work to do, but God’s future is now.

The future is coming at us faster and faster and faster. Last Tuesday, as I was thinking about what I would do today, I was double-booked for a United Methodist Men’s meeting and also a staff parish meeting at the same time, and I thought to myself, you know, a few years ago, we didn’t even have United Methodist Men. As I walked out after the meeting, our girls were practicing basketball, and Jack was dressed out for a late game at the Y. A few years ago, I thought to myself, we didn’t have a place to practice basketball. Now, our girls are first place.

I received the minutes last week in an e-mail from our Lander United Methodist Student Group for Lander and Tech students, and they meet in the basement of the Susannah Wesley building, the old Chipley building. A few years ago, we didn’t have the space or the hope of such a meeting, but now we see quite a few young adults, students every Wednesday, and Jessica Morris has come to us, and helps with the 8:28 Celebrate on Sunday mornings. A few years ago, we didn’t have an 8:28.

Friday and Saturday, Kathy Kelly and I were at a state Salkehatchie Summer Service meeting in Santee, and this year will be year two of our own conference-sponsored camp that’s housed here at Main Street. We didn’t have that before or adequate facilities to host it.

Now, back to last Tuesday. We had a grief workshop for the community going on at the same time. Now, my wife, Caroline – Caroline, who is not only my wife, but is also the counselor at the AGAPE Pastoral Counseling Center – helped organize a grief workshop. That was also going on Tuesday. Some of you participated in that. Now, the people who participated in the grief workshop had to pay for that, but I’m her husband. She gives me grief for free! Of course, moving on, there are circles and there are new Sunday school classes and there are things yet to come.

Did you know – I’d bet some of you didn’t – that we have a Homeland Security sanctioned and trained emergency response team for disasters made up exclusively of Main Street members? We have plans and space for a preschool, which I hope will

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become a supported and growing concern and a new use for our new building. Children need us in many ways. They need us most of all to teach them the things of God.

I love the little letters to God that children write. I keep a collection of all of those. One of my favorites is a child is being asked at a children’s sermon about marriage, and they asked can you think of any Bible verses that have to do with marriage, and the child answers, “Forgive them, for they know not what they do.” I love the way kids think. One in particular, written by a little girl named Harriet Ann says, “Dear God, Are you real? Some people don’t believe it. If you are, you better do something quick.”

God has already done something in the cross, and He has done much through this community, and now it is our turn again. We stand with our buckets empty and then full, empty and then full, passing them on to each other and into the future. It all depends upon all of us standing in line and doing our part.

There’s an old story about a community that was planning a celebration, and every citizen was supposed to bring a bottle of their finest wine, and pour it into a giant cistern in the middle of the town for everyone to share at the celebration. Well, after they had done that, the king came out, and he opened the spigot, and he was going to pour out this cup, the first cup of the finest wine that everyone had brought, but no wine came out! It was just a glass of water, just water. You see everybody in the town had the same idea. They assumed that if everyone else is bringing their best wine then maybe I could get by just bringing a bottle of water. They didn’t think anyone would notice. The town celebration was ruined because no one brought their best, and everyone thought somebody else would cover them.

People of God, we are a community built upon faith and trust. Our community is founded by faithful stewards of the church who have brought their best since 1858 since before this building was built. We are a bucket brigade for God. We are to pass it on, and one more thing, a member of this church and a retired pastor, Larry Dunn, gave me a fascinating idea as we were studying this Gospel text week before last out at Wesley Commons. He said that it might be good as we end it because Jesus said to His disciples, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you,” and he said if that is true and we are continuing Jesus’ ministry, then we can say the words Jesus said as He read that scroll from Isaiah in His hometown. Knowing that, I ask you to repeat after me, the Spirit of the Lord is upon me because He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. We are in the year of the Lord’s favor. We are in the covenant of grace. As Christ was sent, so we are sent as a bucket brigade for God.

Next week during worship, you’ll have an opportunity to make your pledge to pay off the debt that we incurred in our renovations and new construction. I hope you will be here. I hope you will stay for the celebration lunch, which is entirely free. Especially next week, Dr. Charlie Graves will be bringing the message, and I hope the attendance is not up that much more than when I’m preaching. I do hope we have very good attendance. Please be here. Make every effort. Amen.