

Message for January 21, 2018

"A New Beginning"

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 NIV, 1520

13 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. 2 Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. 3 Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. 4 As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. 5 Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. 6 But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. 8 Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. 9 Whoever has ears, let them hear."

18 "Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: 19 When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. 20 The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. 21 But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. 22 The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. 23 But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."

Prayer:

1. According to our record books, Pleasant Grove UMC was dedicated as Pleasant Grove Methodist Episcopal Church on January 19, 1868. The guns of the Civil War had grown quiet and peace was being restored as the soldiers return to the placid farmland that we know today.

2. Today we are celebrating the 150th anniversary of the beginning of Pleasant Grove UMC. In fact, all year long, we will have special celebrations and remembrances.
3. As Helen has shared with us, long before the present church was dedicated, local people worshiped in a log meeting house that was on the land that the present Tracey building is located.
4. We have a deep history of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ to the community.
5. From that time in 1868 forward, through many wars, depressions, and good times the church has withstood the test of time both spiritually and structurally. Just take a look at the unique ceiling design which we think is original. I wish we had a better understanding of it, but our existing records are few.
6. Now consider this!
7. The month of January is named for Janus, one of the few Roman gods without a Greek counterpart. Janus was depicted as having a double face.
 - a. **One face looked to the past for wisdom and the other looked ahead to the future.**
 - b. Janus was thought to influence beginnings and endings and was often found at doorways and entrances.
8. January is the time of year when many of us take inventory of the past and make corrective resolutions for the future.
 - a. We would like to remember the past and learn from it, but not linger in the past because in January we need to look forward – for us “A New Beginning”
9. There are two essential steps to a successful new beginning: remembering and forgetting. It **is not only important to remember the personal past through which we** have lived. It is equally important to remember that past through which we did not live but that influences our lives and the world in which we live.
10. This time of our anniversary is an appropriate time for us to look back and be advised and strengthened by the past so that we may be prepared for what the future holds.
 - a. Our heritage is not only in our private recollections of Pleasant Grove church; it is also heavily endowed with shared memories that speak to us from the past.
 - b. Voices from the past address us all. There is a history of our church that predates the lives of any of us, without which we are ill-prepared to meet the future. We need the stories that people tell us about what it was to be in the church in the past --- all of the good times and all of the challenges.
 - c. Mention the interview of Lula Morrow and Dave Morrow.

11. The very fabric of our faith calls us to look back and remember and to look forward.
12. Consider this: Some of the most tragic stories in the Bible have to do with the lives of people and nations who forgot about God's grace and love for them as they went their own way.
13. When the great prophets of Israel spoke, they nearly always began by looking back.
- a. Our Jewish forebearers in the faith were constantly reminded by Old Testament scriptures to remember the past. *"Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you . . ."* (Deuteronomy 15: 15a).
 - b. The Jewish Celebration of Passover is an annual reminder and reenactment of how God redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt.
 - c. Passover is not only an acknowledgment of the power of God; **it also is a not too subtle warning to "stay out of Egypt." Do not let this happen again.**
 - d. Remember how awful it was! Remembering is essential to freedom from past mistakes.
14. Pleasant Grove UMC has not forgotten how God raised up those early faithful Methodists to take a chance and build a church. They were working on the construction plans while the winds of the Civil War were increasing in strength.
15. The Spanish-born philosopher and critic George Santayana said: **"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Also, we can not just dwell in the past.**
- a. Certainly, we remember the times when the pews were full, and the children were many, but we cannot lament the past and only wish that things in the church were like the past.
 - b. We have a future also!
16. This is a day of thanksgiving as we thank God for the birthday of our church.
- a. Birthdays are when reflect- giving deep thoughts on the past; perhaps our achievements and challenges.
 - b. It is also a time we may look at our future- the years ahead of us and what we want to achieve and how to get there.
 - c. For instance, when you celebrated your last birthday, you may have told yourself that by the time I will be so and so years old, I should have completed that project, etc.
17. As we celebrate Pleasant Grove UMC's 150th birthday, perhaps it will be good if we reflect on what has happened in the past- in the life of the church i.e. the body of believers and what our vision for the future of the church is becoming.

18. I want us to focus on the parable of the Sower in the Gospel of Matthew which was just read by ---?
19. I see this parable as speaking to us – from the past and into the future.
20. The sower who broadcast his seeds and the various locations the seeds landed. Seeds landed on rocky soil and only sprouted. Seeds landed in weeds and quickly got smothered by the weeds and seeds landed in good fertile soil and sprouted and multiplied.
21. In the parable, Jesus said He is the sower, the 'field is the world' and the good seeds are 'children of the Kingdom'.
22. Jesus' intention for planting us in His field at Pleasant Grove is for us to grow.
23. Wherever Jesus has planted us, Jesus wants to see growth.
- a. For instance, when you plant a cucumber or snap bean seeds in your garden in May, you expect it to produce fruits and from the fruits you get seeds that you could use to plant in another season.
 - b. Jesus is expecting the same from us. Jesus wants us to grow where he has placed us so that others may gain from what Jesus did in our lives.
24. Jesus is expecting us to produce fruits that will have the ability to also reproduce from the seeds in the fruits.
- a. Therefore, the author of the Gospel of Matthew reminds us of the words of the resurrected Jesus in chapter 28 verse 19 in which Jesus commanded us to 'go and *make disciples of all nations...*'
 - b. This often requires us to leave our comfort zones and go out into the world in order to create an effective network and web of relationships with members in our communities.
25. Here is an example:
26. A fellow by the name of César Malan branched out to a young lady- Charlotte Elliot, who was visiting some friends in West End London. He met this young lady not in church or during praise and worship time but at a meeting where they were having supper. César said something to Charlotte, but she thought it was a politically incorrect statement, the former therefore apologized. What was it? César told this young lady that he wished she was a Christian. Three weeks later César and Charlotte met again; once again not in church but in a friend's house. Charlotte asked César to show her how to come to Jesus and become a Christian. César's reply was 'just come to Jesus as you are'. Charlotte did exactly that. Later she wrote the famous hymn- 'Just as I am without one plea'.

27. Like César Malan we need to branch out to people, connect with them where they are. You never know how those words that will come out of your mouth will transform someone.
28. Our faith is born and nurtured in a historical experience, in what God has done for us in the past, but it always leads us into the future.
29. As a church today, our anniversary celebration naturally turns our gaze back on our history. But we must let that history be part of our movement into the future. Jesus has commissioned us and sent us into the world with a mission: how will we fulfill it?
- a. We have a responsibility to our young people, to prepare them for what they will face in life.
 - b. We have a responsibility to our older people, to help meet their needs in a changing world.
 - c. We have a responsibility to the community around us, to proclaim the good news of salvation and to be examples of Christ's love.
30. **And, we have an emerging plan.** Let me share this with you:
31. Recently, Sharon and I visited several key staff people in the Baltimore-Washington Conference in Fulton Maryland – outside of Columbia Maryland.
- a. We shared with them dream of a new worship service that can reach out to the much younger people in a large radius from Pleasant Grove UMC.
 - b. We shared that we have significant facilities and committed members who are searching for a path to the future, not a decline into oblivion.
 - c. We have fertile soil at Pleasant Grove UMC where the Word of God can continue to grow.
 - d. But, we stated that the present congregation, while sharing the vision does not have the experience or the stamina to begin a new worship service. We can dream dreams, but we struggle to implement them.
 - e. We need help because we cannot do it ourselves.
 - f. We were well received. We have a lot of homework to do. We expect a site visit from the staff in February. They want to work with us and to help us realize our dreams.
 - g. A possible new beginning!
32. Let the stories of faith, commitment, and service that are told today as we recite the history of our congregation strengthen you, prepare you, and propel you into the next century of our ministry at Pleasant Grove UMC.

33. The Church is a dawning of God's presence in the world in our day. Its purpose is both to remember God's faithfulness, kindness, mercy, and providence through our history up to now, and to move us and our world toward the goal God has given us.
34. So, during this anniversary celebration we stand at a place like the place from which Matthew told the story of Jesus. We look to our history — the history of God's people, of the Christian Church, of this congregation — remembering who we are and where we have been. And at the same time, we look to the future, remembering what we have been put here to do and where we are going.
35. Our history is always leading us somewhere; our glory as God's children is always yet to come.
36. Thanks be to God.