

A Mother-like Church

Thank you to the church leadership, and to all the families of Faith United Methodist Church, for designating this special worship service for me. May your hearts, your minds, and your serving hands be offered to God and blessed by Him. We are the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand.

Today's readings – 1Timothy 6: 11-12 and Isaiah 43:16-19 – are my two favorite scriptures. “But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.” When I was deciding to enter seminary as a young man in Korea, I read this passage from 1Timothy and found that it was given to me as a calling.

And the words from Isaiah 43:19 have been an encouragement for me at times when I am feeling tired or depressed. “See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.”

I stand here today, holding two staffs from the word of God: the first renews my calling, and the second reaffirms my faith. With these two staffs I dare to preach in front of you. I will remember this day as a renewal of my covenant with God.

My name consists of two Chinese root characters: Kun, which means “to stand” or “to build”, and Sang, which means “rightly” or “fearlessly.” With these two staffs from the word of God, I can indeed stand rightly and fearlessly. Reflecting on these two scripture readings, which renew my calling and my belief, I witness this morning an image of what this church can and ought to be.

We often refer to pastors as shepherds. A shepherd, as we know, is a caretaker of sheep. But a shepherd can also refer to a sheep dog, as in “German shepherd.” Last week we received a letter from First United Methodist Church. There was no greeting, just an abrupt notice that read:

Attention: Membership Secretary

Please be advised that Person X joined our church on October 12, 2008. You may send us a transfer of membership or use this letter to update your records.
Sincerely, Membership Secretary.

When I read this letter, I couldn't help but laugh at its contents. It read like a warning: if your sheep enters my property, don't bother trying to find your lost sheep. It sounded like the bark of a German shepherd, not a human shepherd. The church is not a group of memberships. It is the household of God, the family of God.

Last week, I thought a lot about this church and our ministry. I remembered that several weeks ago, one of the church leaders asked me what my vision for Faith UMC was, and I couldn't give him a very clear answer at the time. That is because, without absolute dedication, our visions can easily turn into idle fancies or dreams.

Two Sundays ago, Sun and I welcomed some of our favorite visitors to our home. My daughter Alice, her husband Mark, and their ten-month-old son Benjamin visited us from Chicago. My daughter and her husband left early the next morning for a one week vacation, leaving Benjamin in the care of his grandparents. Unfortunately, I was scheduled to participate in a clergy meeting in Winter Park for two days, so Sun had to take care of Benjamin by herself.

Early on Monday morning, the couple successfully sneaked out of the house, avoiding Benjamin's attention. When he realized that his mother was missing, the baby started to look for her. And finally, when he couldn't find her, he began to cry. He was so shocked at the disappearance of his mom! Sun and I tried to comfort him, by holding him, lifting him up, and playing with him.

After a while, Sun became a substitute mom. Benjamin didn't let her out of his sight. Whenever Sun was moving, he crawled up to her, grabbed her firmly, and would not let her go. So Sun was attached to him day and night, even sleeping with the baby at her side. Ben was very happy with his grandma. For Benjamin, Grandma was his absolute need.

The theologian Paul Tillich used to say, "God is the ultimate concern of human beings." Like a baby who is looking for Mom, human beings look for God who cares for us. Saint Augustine once said, "Until we are resting on God, our soul cannot be rested at all."

We are living in the age of the lost. Sometime we feel like spiritual orphans. I continue to pray and listen for God's calling for this age. I would like to hear God's calling for this church through you, the voices of the people. And I will share with you when I hear that calling, God's calling for us. For the time being, I would like to share an image of the church, a role for this church in this lost and wandering age.

"What is your mother's maiden name?" I am often asked this question by banks and other companies when they try to verify my identity. The answer I give is "Kong", my mother's family name. I'm very proud of this name. "Kong" is the Korean pronunciation of the Chinese name "Confucius." My mother's family is distantly related to the family of Confucius, the great Chinese philosopher from the fifth century B.C. I am therefore a distant descendant of Confucius as well. That tradition gives me a sense of pride whenever I use my mother's name.

I would like to ask the longtime members of this church, what is Faith UMC's mother's name? Does anyone know her name? I will say her name with pride: the Holy Spirit.

As we all know, in Christian doctrine, the Holy Trinity is the key profession of faith. During the Baptismal service, the minister asks at least three doctrinal questions to the candidates. First, the minister asks: "Do you believe in God the Father?" The candidate then answers, "I do." Next, the minister asks: "Do you believe in the Son Jesus Christ as your savior?" The candidate answers again, "I do". Finally, the minister asks a hard question: "Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, Sustainer?" The candidate should answer again, "I do", even if he is not quite sure who the Spirit is.

If the minister asked instead, "Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the Mother?" it would be easier for the candidate to understand and answer. But ministers don't ask it that way, and I confess, neither do I.

It seems that there is something missing in the concept of the Trinity. In a typical family, there is a father, a mother, and children. So why should the Trinity omit the role of the mother? The father is there, the son is there, but where is the mother in the Trinity? That is a very difficult, and rather dangerous, theological question.

The roles of God the Father, Son, and Spirit are revealed differently in the Trinity. The work of the Father is seen in creation. The work of the Son is seen in reconciliation. And the work of the Spirit is sanctification, or mothering.

In a family, those who care for the children are often the mother. As God the Son is sent to do the work of the Father, so God the Spirit is sent to human hearts to help accomplish the Son's work. That is the Spirit "mothering" to human hearts.

We can read further about the mothering role of the Spirit in Romans 8:22: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time." The Holy Spirit knows the pains of childbirth by experience. We also confess that the Son was conceived by Holy Spirit. Who conceives a baby, a father or a mother?

The Spirit also works to form the church, to dwell in the body of believers, to build up the community of faith, and to elicit true worship. God the Spirit is not named a Mother, but compared to a nurturing mother in both the old and the new testaments. In John 14:18, Jesus said, "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you." In Isaiah 66:13 we read: "As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you"

The essential of role of the church is also mothering, and helping the Son's works to be accomplished.

A bishop was interviewing a group of ministerial students about their call to the ministry. He said to each of them in turn, "Tell me about your calling. What do you think God is calling you to do?"

Most of the students gave very practical answers, like, "God is calling me to be a hospital chaplain," or "God is calling me to be a teacher on the college level," or "God is calling me to be a counselor," or "God is calling me to be a pastor."

But then he came to one young woman who seemed a bit shy at first, not quite as bold as the others, and the bishop said to her, "Tell me about your calling. What do you think God is calling you to do?" And the young woman said, "I don't know exactly yet where God will lead me. I just know one thing: God is calling me to introduce people to Jesus Christ!"

When the bishop told this story, he said, "At that moment, when I heard that young woman say that, I wanted to take off my shoes, because I knew I stood on holy ground." You and I and all Christians are called to be the introducer of Jesus Christ to the people. That is the awesome job in the world.

Have you ever wondered why some people are able to accomplish so much with their lives? What makes them so productive? Every body' goal should be productive. In America we are very conscious of productivity at all levels. I have thought about this church in many ways. And come to a conclusion: "This church has to be a productive church."

I want this church to be a productive church. What does it mean to be a "productive" church? A productive institution is one that is doing its role. The role of the mothering church is to bear Christians, to care for Christians, to educate Christians, to equip them with wings of faith, and then let them fly high. To introduce people to Jesus Christ is the church's essential job. In short, the producing the Christians is the productive church.

I have been asked many times how I became a minister and what caused me to go to seminary. To tell the truth, I did not experience a dramatic conversion. Rather, God led me gradually until eventually, I was determined, without hesitation, to be a minister. My calling is to testify that the Christian truth is the only way to live a worthy life.

I read the following story long time ago. It provides a model of what church is supposed to be:

There was once a monastery in the valley of Jericho. The monastery had been famous for both its history and its size for several decades. After a period of Christian persecution and secularization, the monastery was left significantly weakened. The support from the devout had ceased, and only five monks were left. Four of those five were in their seventies or older. There was no hope among them, and they believed that sooner or later the monastery would be closed.

Nearby the monastery was a cabin, which a rabbi used once in a while for meditation. He led a synagogue near a big city, Bethany, and was well known in the village as a wise man. The monks and the rabbi had enjoyed a good relationship for many years. When the rabbi was in his cabin, smoke could be seen coming out of the chimney.

One morning, the five monks were eating breakfast, when one of them spoke. "This morning, I saw smoke coming out of the rabbi's chimney. He must be in his cabin now. Let's go to him for advice on how we can grow our monastery." All the monks agreed that this was a good suggestion, and chief among them, the abbot, decided to make the visit.

So the abbot went to visit his friend the rabbi, and asked him for some advice. "It's been a long time since we have had visitors to our monastery. And we don't know how we can sustain it," the abbot said. "I understand how hard it is," replied the rabbi. "Nowadays, people are blind to their spiritual needs. The synagogue is in the same situation." The two friends, the abbot and the rabbi, hugged with tears in their eyes. Then the rabbi took the Torah and read some verses with his visitor. And he added, "I heard that there is an angel among you in the monastery. This angel will help you."

Returning home, the abbot pondered over what the rabbi had said: "there is an angel among you." He shared the rabbi's message with the four other monks. They were all curious, and also frightened. Who could be this angel among them? They started treating everyone as if he were an angel. The mood in the monastery suddenly changed. Everyone was humble and polite, and showed respect for each other.

Soon afterwards, word spread in the village that there was an angel in the monastery. Hearing the rumors, many visitors came, and became acquainted with the monks. The monastery became famous again because of the angel, and many new novices were received.

All this was due to a wise rabbi's advice. Rather than waiting for an angel to arrive, the monks started to treat others as angels among them.

The way to bring people to Christ is to be an authentic church. Still there are many people who are looking for authentic church. People everywhere are searching for meaning in their lives. A rich young man once came up to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to achieve eternal life?" He asked this, because he was looking for meaning in his life. He realized, if I lose eternal life, the things I have built up are nothing. Do you know what Jesus' answer was? You don't have to look for meaning if you believe in me. If you want to have meaningful life, just follow me.

Believing in Jesus Christ, depending on Him, and following His way are the meaning of life. The church's mother-like role is to introduce people to Jesus Christ, to care for them as Christians, to equip them with wings of faith, and then let them fly high. That is the church ought to be.