

Plant Seed for the Future of Asbury UMC

Mark 4:30-32

Time of Transition

Good morning! Time flies. It has already been a year since we have become one church family. First of all, I appreciate your love and support for my ministry at Asbury UMC and let us continue to work together for God's kingdom.

Conventional wisdom for pastors says that "When you are appointed to a new church, don't try to change anything in your first year." I think this is very wise advice for pastors and I am pretty good at following this advice. As a new pastor at Asbury, I have tried to learn the history and traditions of Asbury UMC first before suggesting any huge changes. However, the Covid-19 pandemic pushed us to change almost everything including the way we do worship service.

Last Tuesday, we had an in-person funeral service for Judy Anderson. Judy was a dear member of our church for a long time so the church would have been packed with people if we had her funeral service in a normal time. However, only 35 people were allowed to be in the sanctuary due to Covid-19. We had to wear masks during the worship service. Also, we couldn't sing hymns together so we had to listen to Judy's favorite hymns. We also tried live-streaming the funeral service for the first time and about 10 people joined the funeral service online. Of course, there was no hugging, no handshaking, no coffee hour. Perhaps, this will be a new normal and how our in-person worship services will look like in September.

Many experts predict that, "Things Won't Just Go Back to 'Normal' After the Coronavirus Pandemic Ends."¹ It means, whether we like it or not, we have to face and embrace the changes we are experiencing. Last Sunday, Rev. John Holt shared his message, "When the Horse is Dead, Dismount." I think his message was timely advice for Asbury UMC.

Things we have done in the church don't work any longer. We had to cancel important fundraising events in spring. We had to postpone our 90th church anniversary celebration. We are not sure if we are able to have a bazaar in the fall. The ways we were operating the church don't work any longer. On Monday, I met Dave and Shirley during Calling hours for Judy. Dave told me that "we are lucky to have a tech savvy pastor in this time of pandemic." Thank you very much for your complement and I am glad to know that you are happy with our online worship services. I am also glad to be able to use this new technology. It really helps us stay connected to one another in this time of semi-quarantine. But, this technology cannot solve the fundamental questions we are facing.

If we cannot gather together physically, how can we still be the church? How can we carry out our mission even though we may not be able to have in-person meetings? The Covid-19 pandemic has forced us to rethink what it means to be a church. We need to deal with this fundamental question about our identity and mission in order to move forward in this new world.

What is the church?

Covid-19 reminds us that the church is not a building but people. Asbury UMC never closed during this pandemic since we are the church. But what does it mean that "we are the church?" An assembly of people does not automatically make it the church. If three people gather for a beer party, we don't call them a church even if they all have membership in the same church. Right? What makes the church, the church? [ppt]

¹ <https://time.com/5827348/great-depression-coronavirus-after/>

Do you know what this picture is? This is a cornerstone of our church building. When people founded the current church building, they placed this stone at the corner of Asbury church. But what is the true cornerstone for the church? It is Jesus Christ our Lord. In Matthew 18:20, Jesus said, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” When we gather in Christ’s name, Christ presents among us and the presence of Christ turns us to the church. Miroslav Volf, a theologian, argues that there are two conditions for an assembly of people to be the church. Faith and commitment. “Without faith in Christ as Savior, there is no church.”² The second condition is a commitment, “the commitment to allow their own lives to be determined by Jesus Christ.”³ It means that we need to open ourselves and our lives to the mission Jesus Christ committed for. In other words, we need to live for the kingdom of God. This commitment to take the path, to imitate Jesus and thrive for the Kingdom of God is a necessary condition for the church to be the church. In this time of rapid transition, we are looking for a new way to be church that is faithful, relevant and meaningful. Instead of looking for some special techniques to draw young people back to the church, we have to look to the cornerstone of the church.

Faithfulness over Effectiveness

As a pastor, I have often found myself trying to be good at performing my job while I often fail to imitate Jesus Christ and clothe myself with Christ. As I have said, it’s been a year since I have become your pastor at Asbury. What do you think of me as your pastor? If you had the chance to rate your pastor from 1 to 10, what numbers would you give me? 1 or 10? 12? I try to be a good preacher so I spend a lot of time writing my sermons. I try to be a good pastor so I spend time checking out how you are doing. I try to be good communicator so I try to reply to your emails and texts as soon as I can. Am I a good pastor if I do these tasks well? Maybe. But job performance does not always relate to the character of the person. The more I work as a pastor, the more I realize that I first need to be a faithful Christian rather than trying to be an effective pastor. Without faithfulness to Christ, effectiveness means nothing for pastors or for the church.

The Covid-19 pandemic has literally stopped most church activities. Instead of being satisfied with what we are doing now, we need to reflect on if what we have been doing and what we have built at Asbury is built on our cornerstone, Jesus Christ and his vision for the coming kingdom of God.

Also, we need to think of how we can be essential for our neighbors during and after the pandemic. Can you see this graph? This graph shows the age group who watches our worship videos? 70 % of the viewers of our worship are over 65. You can see all those missing generations in this single chart. We need to think of the future of Asbury UMC.

30 years later.

We are celebrating our 90th anniversary this year. Have you ever imagined the future of Asbury UMC? How will our church look 20 year from now? I hope that Samantha, Olivia, Cami, April and Patrick... our current youth members will be at the church with their own families and children. David and Kerri Dorsey would be grand-pa and grand-ma. Just like Patricia led a wonderful children’s time at our Thanksgiving worship service, Olivia may give a wonderful lesson to children on Thanksgiving Day in the future. Just like they do now, Ben and Eva will

² Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 147.

³ *Ibid.*, 148.

bring energy and joy to the church though they will be in their twenties. Some of you may be in your heavenly home by then but I hope most of you will stay at the church in good health. I hope that Asbury UMC will be filled with joyful noise of children and amazing testimonies of faith. I pray that people can foretaste the joy of the kingdom of God in which love prevails beyond all racial boundaries. What does Asbury look like in your imagination?

Some may be concerned as to whether Asbury will exist after faithful people of God return to heaven in next 20 or 30 years. Right? If this is what we feel about the future of Asbury UMC, we need to do something about it now. We need to plant the small seed of faith for the future of Asbury UMC today.

According to today's scripture, the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. "It's like a pine nut. When it lands on the ground it is quite small as seeds go, yet once it is planted it grows into a huge tree with thick branches. Eagles nest in it." As the kingdom of God grows, our small acts of faith to make change in our church and in our society will grow and grow.... And it will eventually turn Asbury into a home for many souls.

Like a Large Tree...

One thing I really like about Asbury church is its beautiful front yard. Well maintained lawn with a large tree. I sometimes stand under the tree and enjoy the cool breeze in its shade. I have heard that this tree was planted about 75 years ago when the Asbury church building was completed. I don't know who planted it but I can imagine those people's mind. They may have dreamed that the tree would grow along with Asbury UMC. They might have wanted the tree to provide beautiful shade over the church even though they may never see the fully-grown tree. They did it, not for themselves but for future generations. They did it for us and we enjoy it now.

I believe it is our turn to plant a small seed in the ground for the future of Asbury UMC. I ask you to think of one thing we can do for the future of Asbury and share it with me. You all know my email address and phone numbers. During the week, please pray for Asbury and think of what we need to change or do for the future of Asbury.

As the kingdom of God grows, let us shape our lives in terms of this vision of God's kingdom, and let our mission for God's kingdom guide the future of our beloved Asbury church.

Thank you Asbury family. I love you all. Amen.