

**MESSAGE: “Why Do People Need This Church?”**

**Text: Matthew 18:20; Ephesians 4:1-6**

**Purpose: the purpose of this message is to articulate the unique contribution of the United Methodist Church of Auburn to the wider Church.**

***Introduction –***

**A young boy desperately wanted a puppy. He asked his parents, and they said no, they didn’t think it was a good idea. The boy persisted with the request, and his parents finally relented. “For your tenth birthday,” they agreed, “we will buy you a puppy, but it will be your responsibility to feed, train and care for the puppy.” They brought their son to a shop so that he could make his choice.**

**Several puppies ran to greet him, but one was slower than any of the others. On closer look, the boy noticed that he was missing a hind leg. “I want that one!” the boy exclaimed without hesitation.**

**“Are you sure?” the owner pressed, “I don’t think you really want that one. He won’t be able to run with you, or fetch a ball or anything like that. He was born without one of his hind legs.”**

**The boy’s lip began to quiver. “That’s the one I want. There’s nothing wrong with him!” He then proceeded to raise his pant-leg to reveal that he, too, was missing part of a leg and used a prosthesis for walking.**

**To the retailer, the puppy was less than perfect; to the boy, the puppy was uniquely perfect.**

**Sometimes this is also true of churches. We may yearn to be part of a church. In the abstract, the idea may be compelling and appealing. We make a choice, and start attending. Before long, we find the church to be great in some ways, and perhaps not so much in others. The real is something other than the ideal, and we may become disenchanted. A clergy colleague of mine once took me aside and said, “Steve, if you ever find a perfect church, don’t join it. You’ll mess it up.”**

**If a church has humans in it, you can be sure that it is not perfect. But it may be perfect for me, and it may be perfect for you. Like the boy who found his kindred canine, we, too, find a unique church family through which we can grow our faith. Spiritual journey does not happen in the abstract. It is experienced in a particular place, at a particular time, in a particular way, with a particular community. That is why we take a deeper step when we become a member of a local church. The vow is phrased like this: “As members of Christ’s universal Church, will you be loyal to the United Methodist Church, and uphold it by your prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness?”**

Two weeks ago, we considered the question, “Why do people need Jesus?” I responded, “because he redeems us.” Last week, we considered the question, “Why do people need the Church?” I responded, “because in its humanity, it offers hope and home.” Today, we consider the question, “Why do people need this church, the United Methodist Church of Auburn?” I will give a brief response to the question, but I also want to invite you to give a brief response to the question. In preparation, ask yourself the question, “Why is this church important to me?”

I am not a Methodist from birth. My family of origin attended a Community Church that was Unitarian-Universalist. When I was 10, the pastor, my parents and about 30 others left the church to establish a Congregationalist church which was closer to their heritage. When I began my path to pastoral ministry, I found myself in a Federated church that was a blend of Community, Congregational and Methodist. It was important to me for faith to be horizontal as well as vertical. In other words, “Love of God’ was essential, but so was “love your neighbor.” I had been a part of a church that focused on personal spiritual growth—which was wonderful—but I found it frustrating that it never translated into doing something concrete for those who were suffering or marginalized.

Both Congregationalists and Methodists emphasize the importance of social responsibility as well as personal piety, but there were three things that led me to join the church as ‘Methodist.’ First, Congregational reformed theology emphasizes God’s sovereignty in the making of disciples, whereas Methodist theology emphasizes our human response to God’s call. Second, I found the connectional flavor of the Methodist Church compelling. I found joy in the fact that my church was connected to other congregations across the planet, and I instinctively knew that as a pastor, I would need district superintendents and bishops to be accountable to. Third, my pastor at the time, whom I greatly respected, was a United Methodist. Never underestimate the power that a life of integrity and compassion has in influencing another.

That is how I became a Methodist, but what is it, specifically, about the United Methodist Church of Auburn that I need? As you know, the bishop appointed me here, so I am discovering my response to this question as I experience the Christian journey with you. Here are three gifts I have come to love about this church: this church is passionate about mission, this church enjoys meaningful worship, and this church yearns to be ‘short on rules and long on relationship.’

Upon my arrival, I was impressed by the Mission Store and opportunities for material aid that were evident in the entrance hall. During my second week in the parish, I was invited to the High Street Food Pantry program which is a partnership between our church and the High Street Congregational Church. I was delighted by the number of our folks

who were engaged in this mission which literally feeds 60 area families every week. The generous number of volunteers from our church was one thing, but what really impressed me was the passion that the volunteers have for what they are doing. Without exception, each volunteer spoke enthusiastically of their love for the work and their compassion for the people. They found the mission fun, though challenging, and most of all—deeply meaningful.

Before my arrival, I read on the church profile that the church was looking for deeper roots of spiritual vitality. I also knew that the music program of the church was a priority. I asked God to guide me in crafting worship and to grant me creative partners in the journey. The worship and music committees, and the music leaders are a delight to plan with, and you have been incredibly responsive in your encouragement. Each service of worship has become an adventure!

What do I mean when I say ‘short on rules/long on relationship’? Well, the Methodist Book of Discipline does have rules and our church, to be sure, has collected additional ones along the way; but the Church Council, church committees, small groups and fellowship clusters (for lack of a better term) weave relationship, prayer and congregational care into every meeting. Every day I hear of ways that you encourage and care for one another. Every visit that I make unlocks the story of an authentic life longing to grow in friendship with God and others. I have felt your embrace, and my life is richer for it.

Well, my brief response was not so brief. Too often I forget the advice of my preaching professor, “A good sermon should have a strong beginning and a strong ending, and the two should be as close together as possible.” That said, I want to invite a few of you to offer a brief word on what you love about this church...

Open microphone.