SERMON “Building Fails and Successes”

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Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable unto Thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

When I was a young boy of four or five, my grandfather gave me one of my favorite presents ever – a workbench. He had built it with his own hands. On the back of it was this wonderful peg board covered in tools of all kinds. There were screwdrivers and pliers and wrenches and a level and a hammer. I could spend hours nailing nails into a block of wood or using the screwdrivers and wrenches to take something apart – something that was very unlikely to ever get put back together. Eventually, I came to understand myself as a master builder.

It was not long, however, before the lightbulb in the goose-necked light that my grandfather had attached to the workbench had burnt out. Well, no problem. I was after all a master builder. I grabbed my screwdriver and I shoved it right into the heart of that light fixture. Sparks flew up, a big puff of smoke in the air, the circuit for the basement popped and I think it would be safe to say that no lightbulb ever worked in that light fixture again. I learned at a very early age what a building fail looked like.

Our theme for this year’s Conference Annual Meeting has been “Building Beloved Community”. It is not lost on me that we are living through a time when we feel a lot less certain about our Beloved Community building abilities. So many things have changed. So many things are uncertain. We know the church is changing. There are not the same numbers in our pews. Our culture no longer carves out the space for church. And then you layer on top of that the rollercoaster of the pandemic. Who has even heard of the hybrid worship two years ago anyway? It can easily feel as though ministry in 2021 comes with no playbook. How do we build Beloved Community in this time without a building fail?
For me, 1 Corinthians 12 and 13 are our primer for building Beloved Community. Both chapters are pretty well known scripture passages, though perhaps often we don’t think of chapter 13 in the context of speaking to church as much as we ought to.

As a reminder, 1 Corinthians 12 is the chapter which tells us God has dispersed spiritual gifts everywhere. There are differing spiritual gifts – some have prophetic wisdom and some have grounded-ness in the Spirit; some will excel at caretaking, some at sharing their stories of faith, and some at giving witness to where grace can be found. All kinds of gifts are scattered among the people of God.

We are to take these gifts which are left in our care and work together as Beloved Community. We are to work together in the way in which the parts of the body work together. Everyone doing their part. For together we are not only more effective, but we are being who God call us to be.

Then at the end of Chapter 12 there is this wonderful line, “And I will show you an even more excellent way” to be Beloved Community. And, boom, Chapter 13 is that way. If there is anything in all of our scriptures where we are told what it means to be Beloved Community, it is 1 Corinthians 13.

Now perhaps it is my own history with building fails, but one of the things that strikes me about 1 Corinthians 13 is that it starts with this list of building fails. I may have these amazing God-granted gifts for influencing or engaging, but if they are not used to invite love, they are merely a shrieking sound. I may be able to talk about the scriptures or the history of the church or theological principles for endless hours, but not to draw forth the love of God from the hearts of God’s people, well then I am nothing but a distraction from the true work of Beloved community. I can even be the most sacrificing person around, but if I do so to benefit myself or my ego rather than the welfare of others, I have failed at being who God is calling me to be.

When it comes to building Beloved Community, there are so many ways to be sticking screwdrivers into light fixtures. The good news is that there is one clear way, even during the most uncertain of times, to know that you are not doing so. That you are not doing a building fail. In actual building, there are many measures of how to build something successfully – height, and width, and depth, and level, and plumb. But in 1 Corinthians 13 it makes quite clear that for building Beloved Community there is one measure and only one measure that matters – love. If something is done without love, it is a fail. When something is built with love it will always be a success.
1 Corinthians 13 goes on to talk about building successes. It describes what using love in building looks like. “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.” When hearing these descriptions of love, what really kind of hits me the most in the face is that these seem different from the way our society as a whole seems to want to live right now. There seems to be so little patience or kindness. They quest for societal power seems to be creating plenty of envy, boastfulness, arrogance, and rudeness. There are many among us who believe that wrong is right if it gets you what you want and truth is an illusion to accomplish that.

Church, I believe that one of the things that we need to take away from this scripture is that if we are going to truly be about building Beloved Community, with love as our sole measure, then we are going to look different than the world around us. We are going to stand out. Heck, we might even be chastised because our faith calls us to value different things.

One of the privileges of my position is I get to watch as our churches engage such countercultural ways of building Beloved Community. I see churches spending their summer days packing lunches for children in need and their families. I have seen churches using technology to be present with those who are feeling alone in the hospital even when they couldn’t physically be with them. I have watched churches hang rainbow flags outside of their buildings to be sure that people in their community know that there is a place where they can be that they can feel safe and valued and love. I have seen folks in our churches stich together quilts with the last words of George Floyd on them, not only as a remembrance to this beloved child of God, but also as a cry for justice. I’ve seen our churches fill an entire shipping container full of items for our partners in the United Church of Christ in Zimbabwe. In doing such things, we may look different than much of what is happening in the rest of the world. But if we are to build with love at our core and love as our sole measure, look different we should.

There is one final part of 1 Corinthians 13 that I would draw our attention towards. It is these words: “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.” I wholehearted believe that if we are truly invested in building Beloved Community, one of the things we must do is take risks. Love does not play it safe. A community that is invested in growing love goes all in on what such love may require, even when it may come with a cost.

I sometimes get asked why the United Church of Christ is the church that I have chosen to be a part of. The answer to that really can be summed up by two historic statements of the church. We'll save one of them for another day. The one I’d raise up today
predates the formation of the United Church of Christ. In 1943, in anticipation of a potential merger, representatives of the Congregational Christian churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church wrote a document explaining what was unfolding entitled the Basis of Union. The preamble of this document talks about how all denominations are indeed part of one Church, the Church of Jesus Christ. In the third paragraph of this preamble, this statement is made, “Believing that denominations exist not for themselves but as parts of that Church, within which each denomination is to live and labor and, if need be, die”. In this statement I hear the commitment that should the opportunity arise for us to love in bigger, broader, bolder ways, we should give up who we are now to become what love is calling us to be. It is that risk-taking commitment that draws me to be a part of the Beloved Community known as the United Church of Christ.

The task of ministry – the task of building Beloved Community may well feel uncertain and unfamiliar in these days. Our impulse then may be to hold back as to not risk a building fail. I hope that we act counter to that urge. I draw upon inspiration from one of the prophetesses of this year, Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman. In her poem, *The Miracle of the Morning* she writes:

“While we might feel small, separate, and all alone,
Our people have never been more closely tethered.
The question isn’t whether we will weather this unknown,
But how we will weather this unknown together.
So on this meaningful morn, we mourn and we mend.
Like light, we can’t be broken, even when we bend.
We ignite not in the light, but in the lack thereof,
For it is in loss that we truly learn to love.”

If Ms. Gorman’s words are true, and I believe that they are, we as prepared as we have ever been. If we have learned, during these uncertain days, to love in new ways, then we have everything, everything we need to be God’s Beloved Community. Amen