

**“Different”**  
**2 Corinthians 5:1, 14-21**  
Sermon by Jan Edmiston  
60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration of Fairlington Presbyterian Church  
April 15, 2007

We are blessed to be celebrating the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this congregation. 60 years of ministry is cause for great celebration.

Just last week, I heard there is also a congregation in this Presbytery – a church in Maryland – that will celebrate its 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary this summer, which is amazing.

But the news is also sad: that 300 year old church has been struggling for over a decade to the point that they have slowly realized that their ministry is over. In fact, they realized a while back that it was probably time to close. But, before they close, they want to celebrate their 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

There is almost no congregation left. There is no life-changing mission, no real outreach, no Christian education program. There is no future for that particular congregation. There is no vision for great things to come. It’s all about the past for them.

I don’t know that church, so I can’t venture to guess all the complexities about why a once-vibrant congregation would close. But my hunch is that it has something to do with what Paul was talking about in his letter to the church in Corinth, Greece.

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From the moment we started to prepare for the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this congregation, we wanted to focus – not on the past but – on the future. Without a vision for the future – in the words of the Proverbs – we perish.<sup>1</sup>

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The past, of course, is precious to us.

We stand on the shoulders of 45 charter members, and of several people here who have been active members for 30, 40, 50 continuous years. We remember the strong leadership of former pastors and elders and deacons. These memories are sacred to us.

But they are sacred is not because of mere sentimentality.

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<sup>1</sup> Proverbs 29:18

What makes these memories sacred is not what humans have done, but what God has done through the people of Fairlington Presbyterian Church.

What I'd like you do for a moment is think back to something you have learned or experienced or heard or realized because of this church that made a difference in your life spiritually. Think for a moment:

- Was it the powerful taste of Welch's grape juice the first time you had communion, when you suddenly realized you were part of something bigger than yourself?
- Was it the joy that washed over you when you witnessed the baptism of your child or grandchild, or the baptism of another child, and suddenly you caught a glimpse of the unconditional love of God?
- Was it the moment when you were teaching Sunday School or Godly Play and you realized the enormous privilege of introducing Abraham and Sarah to little children who had never before heard that amazing story?
- Was it a cold night during Advent when you stood out on the front lawn of this property dressed like an angel or a wise man while hundreds of onlookers came by – hoping against hope – to find Christmas spirit in the form of a live nativity scene you happened to be a part of?
- Was it the holy moment when you sang “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” on the Sunday after 9-11 and you realized that God is stronger than any evil that might befall us?
- Was it the afternoon you sat in these pews to say “good-bye” to someone you love, as others eulogized her or shared stories about him?

These are the moments that feed our souls. They are more life-changing than the amusing anecdotes we might find from being members of a club, or even the heart-warming stories we might remember from family reunions. These moments are more eternal than the bland memories of getting dressed every Sunday and making our way into the same pews each week.

Think for a moment: is there a person, is there a song, is there a prayer, is there a milestone that made a lasting difference in your life in this place or in any place of worship? My hunch is that there are countless little moments. This is what we want to consider today. This is what God has done.

How is your life spiritually different because of Fairlington Presbyterian Church? And how have *you* made a difference in Christ's name because of Fairlington Presbyterian Church? According to Paul, our spiritual journey must include both aspects: personally *we* are different, and because of this, we try to make a difference in the world.

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When Paul wrote this letter, there were probably about 150 to 200 members of the Corinthian Church and they were a fairly diverse bunch. Some were Jewish Christians but many more were Gentile converts. And as they were getting the hang of what it meant to be a new Christian community of faith, they struggled with issues like relationships and leadership and rituals and unity – in spite of diversity.

Like the Corinthian church, this congregation has struggled with similar issues. When the church was founded 60 years ago, most of the members – maybe all of the members – literally lived in the Fairlington neighborhood. Most had come to Washington after the war. Most were from other parts of the country. Most were lifelong Presbyterians – although there were other Protestant traditions in the mix.

As the years have passed, we've seen some dramatic changes: most of our members do not live in Fairlington anymore, and some even live in the far reaches of Fairfax or even Loudoun County. As always, we've come from all parts of the United States, but these days we've also come from Korea and Cameroon and Ukraine, Hong Kong and Lebanon, Peru and Mexico.

While many are lifelong Presbyterians, our pews are also filled with an array of people from other Protestant traditions, along with Roman Catholics or former Roman Catholics, with several who grew up with no faith tradition at all. Occasionally a small group of Muslims from Turkey<sup>2</sup> join us for worship. And we continue to work out relationships and leadership and rituals and unity – in spite of diversity.

We are theologically and politically diverse. Some of us would never associate with the people sitting beside us in our pews outside of church. In that way we are different. We are not blue or red here – we are the purple that marks the coming of Christ in Advent and the passion of Christ in Lent.

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Paul's message here is this: if we are a part of this congregation which claims to follow Jesus *who died but is alive again*, then

- we will be different from the rest of the world, and
- we will make a difference in the world.

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<sup>2</sup> Members of the Rumi Forum occasionally worship with us.

No church is meant to be a private club that feeds its members and continues only to sustain itself. Those churches eventually die.

Paul put it this way:

- if we are in Christ, we are a new creation, different than we were before, and
- if we are in Christ, we are ambassadors for Christ – showing other people what God’s love looks like.

So . . . how are we doing? Are *we* different because of what we have learned here at Fairlington Presbyterian Church? And are we serving in such a way that *the world* is different?

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One of the most obvious and dramatic ways Fairlington Presbyterian Church has fulfilled Paul’s challenge recently is with a ministry called Computer CORE<sup>3</sup>. The entire ministry of Computer CORE is clearly “of God.” If you had asked me even ten years ago, if such a program was even possible, I would have said, “No.”

As with most work that involves God’s healing touch – this work started with a need. (Just as after WWII, there was a huge need for a Presbyterian presence in this neighborhood, at the cusp of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there was a huge need to offer computer training to low-income people in our neighborhood.)

One of our deacons had served dinner at the Carpenter’s Shelter with a group from this church, and she noted that what the residents of Carpenter’s Shelter needed was jobs, and they would not get jobs without job-training, and these days all job-training involved computer skills. And where were poor people going to get their hands on computers and computer training?

Here’s the first miracle: she wrote up a proposal to the elders and asked for \$10,000 to start a computer training program in our church building and the elders gave it to her. (Anyone who’s been part of church leadership can attest that this doesn’t happen everyday: someone has a dream and we happen to have a chunk of money available to fulfill that dream.)

Several miracles and six years later, we have now trained over 350 people with the help of this church and several business partners, with hundreds of volunteers, and with the blessing of this congregation.

Twice a year, there are graduation ceremonies in this building that are – in my humble opinion – as inspiring as any Easter service we might offer. They are drenched in resurrection.

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<sup>3</sup> CORE is an acronym for “Community Outreach and Education.”

At one graduation ceremony a couple of years ago, a young man asked to have his picture taken with me. I had never seen him before in my life, but he knew I was the pastor of this congregation. He was adamant about having his picture taken with me. “I have to have a picture with you to show my family,” he said.

“Why is that?” I said. And his response was amazing:

“I am from Morocco,” he said, “and I am Muslim. When I told my family that I was taking computer classes in a Christian church, they told me to get out of there. ‘The Christians want to kill you!’ they said. But I told them, ‘No!’ These Christians don’t want to kill me. They want to help me change my life.’ I want to show my family a picture of the priest of these Christians who want to save my life.”

This young man once served as a busboy at Bistro Bistro. He is now the head teller in a federal credit union. Because of this church.

There are many stories like this out of Computer CORE. In that single program – located on our education wing – we are ambassadors for Christ. We have made a difference in the world.

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*A church thrives when it is dynamic and willing to make changes in the way it serves.* What never changes is the eternal message – the spark – that begins and ends with Jesus Christ.

What *has* to change is the way we share that message.

Tonight we will dedicate a worship space downstairs we call Holy Grounds as in the story of Moses and the Burning Bush. Moses saw a shrub in flames but the fire did not consume it, and he heard a voice say:

*Take your sandals off your feet,  
for the place where you stand is holy ground.  
I am the God of your father; the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac,  
and the God of Jacob.*<sup>4</sup>

This is a different kind of worship service, specifically for people who have been burned by church, or want something less formal and more intimate, where questions and even doubts are an essential part of the worship experience. We are trying to do something new. We are trying to make a difference in the lives of people who do not worship with any kind of church.

In closing, try to imagine what this church might be like 60 years from now. Most of us will be long gone. But what does it tell God, if we are only concerned about our tenure here; if we don’t care if the church falls apart once we are gone?

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<sup>4</sup> Exodus 3:4-6

It is our prayer that Fairlington Presbyterian Church will be making a difference, that Fairlington Presbyterian Church will be transforming the world long after we are gone. But this only happens if *we* are different, if we are transformed.

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In a world in which many focus first and foremost on themselves and their own, Jesus focused on what he called “the least of these” – the hungry and thirsty, the naked and imprisoned, the stranger.<sup>5</sup> Jesus even prayed for his enemies.<sup>6</sup>

In a world where lines are drawn and walls are built to separate people, Jesus pushed the borders<sup>7</sup> and engaged all kinds of people from all different backgrounds: a Samaritan woman at a well<sup>8</sup>, a hated tax collector in Jericho<sup>9</sup>, a man burdened by demons<sup>10</sup>.

This is the kind of person we say we follow. What he has done, we are also called to do. We are his ambassadors.

Our church will be measured – eternally – not by earthy measures of success. We will be measured by how we were different from the world and how we made the world different in the name of Jesus Christ.

Consider today how this church has made you a new person. And consider what we might do to make the world new because that is our calling through the One who died and lives again.

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 25:34-40

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 5:44

<sup>7</sup> Jesus spent most of his life in Galilee on the northern border, living in the northern-most town of Capernaum.

<sup>8</sup> John 4:4-42

<sup>9</sup> Luke 19:1-10

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 12:22