

Dedication Sunday
Fifth Sunday in Easter
May 6, 2018

Dr. Susan F. DeWyngaert

Psalm 1
John 15:9-17

Friendraising

I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. – John 15:15b



“Red Sky Tree” Marion Baldwin

St. Francis of Assisi had a vision. He heard the voice of God telling him to “rebuild my church.” Unsure of what that meant, he chose a ruined church near where he lived. He recruited all kinds of people to help. Some just came to watch, and before they knew it, they were mixing cement. Others were so frail they couldn’t lift a single brick without help, but that worked out, since it led them to meet more people than they would if they had been stronger.

To most of them, building the church became more important than finishing it. Building it together gave people who were formerly invisible to each other a fresh connection, friendship and sense of worth. When it was done at last, Francis Church did not stand as a shelter from the world, but as a reminder that the whole world is God’s House.¹

When I read about that, I thought of Jan Lynn who painted this beautiful calligraphy. For months she lay on her belly in sweltering heat, and shivering cold inscribing the names of those who have gone before in the faith.

I thought of Pete Bishop and John Dawson and all the team who built the set for Children of Eden, and of Marci Magette and Marty Walker who snuck in here on Saturday nights after the performances and rearranged it all so that we could worship here in the morning.

I thought of the folks who raised the money to build this magnificent structure in the first place, their love and the sacrifices they made, so that we can be here now.

On Friday afternoon a small group of us gathered here for a funeral for a man – I can barely bring myself to say this – a man whose family has buried three sons. They are not members, but because this church welcomes all, you came alongside them with comfort and help.

And there are so many others. There are the people who teach Woods’ children the things of faith even though their own children are long grown. Adults and teens who spend most of the vacation days they’re allotted every year in PA, or OH or NC, sweating in the sun and sleeping on air mattresses at Woods Work, so that the cherished children of God can have a simple,

decent home. There are musicians, property volunteers, gardeners, and volunteer ministry coordinators and the magnificent staff of this church who serve tirelessly, ably and with love every day.

What are we doing? With every gift, each sacrifice, we are building and rebuilding the church; we're "friendraising" for God. In this age of impermanence it's great to be part of something that we know will outlast us.

The twentieth-century theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr said:

"Nothing worth doing can be achieved in one lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we must be saved by love."ⁱⁱ

Love is the world's salvation. Costly love. That's what we are doing here.

Listen to Jesus. These are part of his last words to his disciples on his way to the cross. [Jesus said] *As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.*

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.

You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray together:

Lord Jesus, your love is salvation, the salvation of our complicated lives and the only hope of the world that you love. Startle us with your word this morning. Help us to hear you, and in hearing make us more loving, more willing to live sacrificially, as your beloved and chosen friends. Amen.

Some people say this is all a monumental waste of time and money, all this – the buildings, the programs and missions, the classes and fellowship gatherings, all of it, they say, is like the costly ointment a woman once poured on Jesus' feet. "The church is unnecessary," they say, "I can worship God at the ball field, or on the golf course, in the car, in the laundry room or at the Walmart." But can they? How is that working?

Not all that well, actually. Startlingly many of this community's young people say that they feel overwhelmed, disconnected and exhausted; some say they are desperate. Vast numbers of our

neighbors – young and old alike-- suffer with mental illnesses and addictions. Families are estranged. Many elderly feel isolated and lonely. Opioid deaths have increased by 300% in the last 3 years.ⁱⁱⁱ At the same time all this has been happening, a rapidly growing number of Americans are choosing to opt out of church life. Does anyone see a connection?

There's a business up on Ritchie Highway that has one of those changeable signs out front. For a while now the sign has read: "Lost our moral compass. Please return." I don't know anything about the business or what its owner means by that, but I think he or she has a point. America has gone off the rails. And we are looking at serious trouble if we don't get back on, and soon.

In his book, *The Jesus Way*, Gene Peterson speaks about the importance of place, the necessity of having a place like this to come together, and the necessity of being together in one place. The church, of course, "church" is not a building; the church is its people, but the church is also a place, a still point in a turning world. Church is the place, a beautiful place where we gather to pray and say "thank you." It is the gathering that makes the difference, and from this place we go every week into the world to live for Jesus, and we return the next Sunday. That constancy is what's missing from so many people's lives today.

Reese Witherspoon, Stanford educated, Academy Award winner, was being interviewed about her life and the demands of work and parenting three growing children. She said, "I take the kids to church and Sunday school. Of course I do... I really think it's an important thing for them to know that there are things that are bigger than they are."^{iv}

I agree with Ms. Witherspoon; it's not only important that adults and children learn to worship God, and discover the things of faith, it is the single most important thing we will ever learn, and the salvation of the world.

Today's gospel lesson takes place on Jesus' last evening with his disciples. He gives them (us) clear, specific instructions. He says, "Abide in my love." What does that mean? He goes on to explain that love requires making a sacrifice. "Greater love hath no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." Listen: Jesus is not calling us to comfort or security or ease. He's commissioning us – you and me – he's charging us all to change the world! Bear much fruit! Fruit that will last.

The church is his chosen vehicle, the instrument he conceived, the channel through which he enables us to do this. The church is not perfect, far from it, but it is vital.

Today is Dedication Sunday, the day when we ask all our members and friends to stand up and be counted for the support of his church in the new program year. The officers – your deacons and elders and pastors – 100% have gone ahead of you. We have pledged. Many of YOU have already made your commitments too, and we are so, so grateful for that. But as Tom/I will show you in a minute, we are not there yet. If you think we don't need your pledge, please allow me to gently correct that misunderstanding – we do need you! We need everyone! It costs well over \$2 million each year to run this church and all its ministries – life giving ministries. Nearly all of that needs to come from us.

The year ahead will be critical. We are bringing a new youth minister on board as well as a new pastor for young adults and Christian education. Participation in our family ministries and our music ministries is exploding. We have mission teams heading out to projects nearby and to the far reaches of the earth. Woods is poised to grow in so many exciting ways, but we can't do any of it without you!

Tawes and I have already made our pledge. We're in! And in spite of everything we've been through this year, ours is an increase.

So I invite you to join us. Support the great work of this great church just as generously as you can.

This is such a fragile time in history. Our ministries are more important than ever, our missions are more critical, our Care and Counseling Center is busier. More than ever, people are longing for deep friendship, friendship with God, spiritual connections with others, standing together on common ground, of leaning on one another for support and encouragement. Times of uncertainty and stress cause each of us to see what is really important, who—when the chips are down—we intend to be.

My hope and prayer is that, as you do this, you will think about what Woods Church means to you, to your children, to this community, and to the world.

I mentioned earlier that our family has been through a lot this year. Some of you know, but perhaps others don't, that at Thanksgiving my husband was diagnosed with Spindle Cell Sarcoma, a rare and aggressive cancer of the connective tissue. Tawes had a course of radiation in January and February and surgery at Johns Hopkins in March. I am pleased to say that he is doing well, and his prognosis is good.

All this happened about the same time Pastor Brandon announced that he would be moving to Kansas City and Pastor Nancy's Sabbatical began. This could have been a terrible season for us, but in fact, just the opposite has been true. Your prayers, the delicious meals you've dropped off at our house, your cards, calls, and emails, and all the support you've offered has buoyed us more than I can possibly describe. You have been the best friends we could have ever hoped to have.

Another reason Tawes is doing so well is that you provide us with health insurance. Because you pledged, we have access to the finest medical care in the world. We are enormously grateful.

God forbid something like this should happen again to another member of our staff, or to someone in his or her family. But if it does, we will stand beside one another in just this same way. I don't know if you are aware that it's been 6 years since anyone on our staff received even a cost of living increase...6 years. The Woods staff works for very little; they do it out of love for God and love for God's people. We need to do right by them. So please, do the best you can on this. Even if you've never pledged before, take that card in your bulletin and use it.

The Bible says that we are Jesus' friends. *That* in itself is a miracle. He said, "Others have called you servant, but I have called you friend." I often say that during the benediction, because it's a vital thing to remember and a good way to live. It is also the best reason to give.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, Harper One, 2010, 10

ⁱⁱ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, University of Chicago Press, 2008, 63

ⁱⁱⁱ https://bha.health.maryland.gov/OVERDOSE_PREVENTION/Pages/Data-and-Reports.aspx

https://bha.health.maryland.gov/OVERDOSE_PREVENTION/Pages/Data-and-Reports.aspx

^{iv} https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/reese_wITHERSPoon_361620?src=t_church