

January 13, 2008

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## MERIDIAN STREET UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

### **A Time to Ponder: Community**

Meridian Street is in the midst of a planning process. Your input in this process is vital to our future. So, each Sunday during the month of January and the first Sunday of February we will be focusing on a different aspect of who we are becoming as the people of faith at Meridian Street United Methodist Church. Last week we asked you to think about radical hospitality and share your thoughts with us. Many, many of you did. Thank you. It is not too late to respond to our first question as you can find it on the church website. This week, we consider what it means to be the body of Christ. We are remembering our roots as Christian community from the early church and exploring how to live in Christian community here and now at Meridian Street. In the process we will Imagine Meridian and ponder not only who we have been in the past, who we are in the present, but also who we are becoming as we envision our future.

Let us pray

In the Book of Acts, there is an account of the Day of Pentecost which we consider to be the actual birth day of the Christian Church. In the midst of that amazing story, Peter called people to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. We are told that "about three thousand were added to their number that day." Following those baptisms, the community of faith was established and we are told these words about the way they shared their lives together as the extended family of Jesus Christ.

Read the passage Acts 2: 42-47

A holy fire began to spread after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Though we would imagine that hearing that Jesus was crucified people would have become afraid and stepped away from the teachings of Jesus, but the opposite actually happened. The disciples grieved and regrouped and came out into the light and began to teach and preach and baptize in the name of Jesus. The spark of his spirit caught the imagination and inspiration of people who came to put their lives, their trust, and their salvation in the hands of the risen Lord. A community of the faithful began to build, not only in Jerusalem and the surrounding areas, but with the teachings of Paul, people were baptized into the faith far beyond Jerusalem.

Baptism became the entrance into the early church and it continues to be the glue that holds Christians together. We may not all agree on specific issues and we do not all carry the same rituals and traditions, but it is by our baptism that we find our identity as a disciple of Jesus Christ and it is baptism that connects us one to the other as the extended family of God's grace.

In the book of Ephesians we are told that we are “fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household and joined together we become a dwelling in which God lives by God’s spirit.”

We are the household of God, Meridian Street. The spirit of God dwells within this community of faith. And though we are blessed by this beautiful facility, what makes us holy is not the beauty of the architecture but the presence of God in our midst. What brings us strength is not our numbers, but our devotion to our God. This truth defies the logic of a “bigger is better” culture. When it comes to the journey of faith, deeper is better.

Saxophonist Charlie Parker is credited with saying, “if it’s not in your heart, it’s not in your horn.” It is what lives deep within us that shapes us as individuals and as a community of faith. According to Walter Brueggemann, theologian and author, “the people of God were continually born and reborn from within.” - See *Rediscovering the Sacred Center* by Howard E. Friend

We are continually being reborn as God’s people. We are born into this life and then reborn as we are baptized into the love of God, the grace of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. In this community of the faithful, we are then open to being ever more shaped by the love of God for us and for the community of faith around us.

In the early church, the people gathered together to pray, to offer their praise to God, to share meals together, to study and learn from the disciples, and to share their lives and goods with one another. It was their dedication to Christ and each other that made them strong enough to withstand the pressures of the world around them. We find ourselves in a different reality. It is the world around us where we find our comfort zone and the pressure for us is that voice deep within that calls us to something more, something deeper; something profound.

As we look at our future together, we need to truly consider who we want to be as community. We have the opportunity to deepen our commitment to God and to each other. If our faith is not deep in our heart, if faith is not at the center of our life together as community, it will not be in our worship or study, or prayer or service. All of this will be a pale imitation of faith, if we are not centered in the spirit of God. As we plan for our future we are called to be reborn again from within.

Howard Friend writes in his book *Rediscovering the Sacred Center* about his goldfish, Harvey. When Howard was a little boy, his goldfish, Harvey, lived in a glass bowl. Harvey the fish, swam the same direction, at the same speed, and the same depth every day. Hard as he might try, Howard could not create an environment that would change the practices of Harvey the gold fish. Then one day, Howard’s grandmother told him that they needed to clean the gold fish bowl and they would need to put Harvey into another bowl for a few minutes. Howard decided that this would be the perfect time for his

beloved goldfish to swim in a bigger sea, so he put him into a bathtub full of water. For a moment or two, the goldfish seemed startled when he was placed in the bathtub, but within a couple of minutes, he was back to his pattern, swimming in a ten inch circle, going the same direction he always went and at the same depth he swam in the goldfish bowl. Howard was crushed. Here he gave his fish an opportunity at new experiences and at new life and the fish went back to his same old pattern.

How comfortable it is to remain in the same old familiar patterns. How vital it is in our life of faith to be born anew from within, to explore our relationship with God at a deeper level, to take the next step in our journey of discipleship, to continue to grow as a faithful follower of God and rededicate ourselves to service in the name of Jesus Christ. In so doing, we become ever more the body of Christ in this world.

We are community, bound to God and one another through our baptism. For many of us, the vows of baptism were made for us when we were infants. Some of our struggle is embracing the new birth and identity that shapes us from the baptism that we cannot actually remember. However, it is not the memory, but divine love that ultimately shapes us.

People of faith are not intended to live at arms length from each other or from our God. That is the way the world lives – keeping a safe distance from others, relying on our own individualism to guide us. Ours is a culture comfortable with keeping relationships superficial. We attempt to sustain friendships with a brief text message now and again. We tend to think we know people based on the media hype or first impressions.

From the model of the early church we find Christian community as we gather often, offer our praise to our God, study together, eat together, and share our lives in such a way that we create a community where we can share our deepest desires, our fears and our hopes. At the heart of all we do is the love of God that sustains us and guides us.

As we look forward, may we consider the ways we have experienced community at Meridian Street in the past and in the present. Then, may we open our selves to the spirit of God within us and explore what this community will become in our future.

What is in our heart is essential to the way we live our lives. May we carry God's love for us and our love for one another as the foundation of our faith journey.

Please take a few minutes to *Imagine Meridian* as you consider community. Use the paper inserted in the bulletin. Give it to me or leave it in the pew or drop it in the baskets provided at the exits. Take it home, think it over, send it online, but please participate. How will we grow stronger as the body of Christ at Meridian Street?