

# 125 Years of Sundays. . . But Why?

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The Community Church of Sebastopol  
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## John 8:26-39

New Testament professor, Tom Long, shares this story. Every summer he and his wife spend a few weeks at Maryland's Chesapeake shore. They have a small cottage there. And every summer, while there, they worship at the Antioch Church. Sadly, it is a church in decline – aging membership, not much money, can't afford a hire a full time pastor. Long says that for years, the church never locked its doors – no one had a key! Finally the church insurance company insisted that they start locking the church. So a lock was purchased for the front door, and the key was hidden under a rock in the church yard. But just to make sure no one forgot the location, church members spray-painted the letters, KEY, on the rock.

Every summer that part of Maryland celebrates a peach festival. And every year, the few remaining members of the church come together and prepare crab cake sandwiches and peach cobbler to sell during the festival. Long and his wife always help out. He recalls one particular afternoon. He came around corner of the church with a platter of sandwiches, and for a moment stopped and took in the scene before him. People were seated under the shade of trees or at tables – people of all colors, all walks of life, young and old, all laughing and talking, eating sandwiches and peach cobbler prepared by the faithful members of a dying little church. And Long says that for just a moment he saw it there before him... a vision of the new heaven and new earth; a vision of the Kingdom – the Reign, of God; a vision of the world the way God created it to be.

I wonder, has that ever happened to you? You come to church on a Sunday, expecting it to be a Sunday rather like any Sunday, and suddenly, without warning, all around you, you find the reign of God breaking in. And here all you wanted were a few moments of peace and a cup of coffee. I once read that Sunday worship is not just a private matter. It's not personal therapy or a crutch for the weak. Worship and singing and prayer are all about refusing to believe that the way things are has to be the way they will always be; worship is about imagining how the world could be and then gaining the wisdom and hope and energy to join God in bringing that new world about. When we pray, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done," it really is nothing less than a prayer for the subversion of the world as it is so that God's new world might come.

One morning after breakfast, Elizabeth Barrett Browning left her husband and went upstairs while the dishes were being cleared. Sometime later, while he was working at the table, soft footsteps sounded behind him and his wife's hand on his shoulder kept him from turning to look at her. She slipped a manuscript into his pocket saying, "Please read this, and if you do not like it, tear it up." What she had given him to read was her classic, *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. Hidden in one of these marvelous sonnets of love is this line: "The face of all the world is changed, I think, since first I heard the footsteps of thy soul."

"The face of all the world is changed..." For 125 years this church has gathered in Sebastopol on Sunday morning to sing our song, proclaim our hope, to affirm that the reign of God is at hand, indeed is already among us. For 125 years we have done this. And I suppose that - people in this less than church-friendly county of ours could - point to the ongoing turmoil in our world and in our lives and ask if anything has really changed. One could argue that, after 125 years of prayers and hymns and sermons, the face of this tired and broken old world of ours looks pretty much the same, so why do we bother? .

Garrison Keillor, in one of his Lake Wobegon monologues, talks about an especially inspiring sermon preached by Pastor Ingqvist at Lake Wobegon Lutheran Church during the Christmas season, a sermon in which he said that we, like the Wise Men, can all follow God's Light to Christmas and to Christ. Says Keillor, "And then church was over and they all marched out into the snow and home for pot roast. Sometimes when you walk out that door after church, you are inspired and expect things to look different – expect to walk out and be in the New Jerusalem – and it's a disappointment to see it's still Lake Wobegon. A vacant lot across the street, dogs running around, the Dieners' house still unpainted with two broken-down cars in the backyard, and the back door of the Sidetrack Tap. But even here there is a star to follow and we may come through." Even here, there is a star to follow; even here there are hints of God's Kingdom, hints of a new world a-comin'. And that's why we bother.

I chose this particular text for this 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary worship service because in it I see a powerful vision of this new world we sing and preach about. The disciple, Philip, directed by an angel of the Lord, has an encounter with an Ethiopian eunuch. The man is a seeker, reading the sacred texts and wanting instruction. Philip becomes his teacher and afterwards the Ethiopian asks, "What is to prevent me from being baptized." Well, let's see... you are a foreigner, a gentile, a eunuch...the very definition of an outsider, one of them, not us, excluded by law from even participating in worship. Someone reading

This story in the first century would expect Philip to say, "No way am I going to baptize you; no way you are going to be part of our community. Go on your way and don't come back." But Philip, in the best tradition Jesus, does the unexpected. He baptizes the man, brings him into the circle, proclaims him a brother in Christ. And the world shifts just a bit on its axis, and the kingdom comes just a bit closer. I like to think that this is what has been happening here for 125 years.

I once heard the church described as a community of dangerous memory. And it's true! I remember... I remember Abraham and Jacob; I remember Sarah and Rachel and Deborah; I remember Isaiah and Jeremiah; I remember Jesus and Peter and Mary Magdalene and Lydia and Paul. I remember Sara and Jack Gerboth and Bob Stice and Dorothy McHugh and Roy and Harriet Jacobson and Ed and Margaret Bawden, and Jerry Hudlow and Cal Gay. I remember. I remember the saints who faithfully worshipped here over the years, who dared to dream of a better world, and that this church had a role to play in bringing that world about.

Yes, I remember... I remember our high school youth, during World War II, mobilizing to help guard the Buddhist Temple in town after someone tried to burn it down. I remember our church partnering with the Methodist Church and Mel Davis and the city to build Burbank Heights, the first affordable housing for seniors in our area. I remember our church working with Burbank housing and the faith-based organizing project to build Bodega Hills – self-help housing and affordable apartments. I remember our church starting the inter-church Food Pantry. I remember J.L. Atteberry and Ellen Stillman talking about used convection ovens he could get from Kentucky Fried Chicken that could cook Apple Pies in 30 minutes. And he made it happen. I think of the hundreds of children sent to camp from apple pie income generated by those ovens. I remember the construction of Memorial Hall and Pilgrim Center and the difference they have made to our church programs and to our wider community. I remember our outreach to the homeless and how one homeless man, Herbie, filled in faithfully as our volunteer custodian the week Keith was on our church mission trip to New Jersey. I remember Darryl and Alvin's wedding and that great celebration. I remember – remember so many times in the life of this church when, for just a moment, the face of the world changed and there it was, the new heaven and new earth. And it goes on.

The saints challenge us, certainly our Lord challenges us, to dare to see a new heaven and new earth each time we come together. The memories are dangerous because they refuse to accept our weariness and apathy, our tired acceptance of the world as it is. They are dangerous because, like Philip with the Ethiopian, they invite us to keep drawing the circle of extravagant welcome and hospitality ever wider. They remind us that this is a place where parties are thrown for wayward sons and daughters, where even life's losers are honored and precious, and everyone, absolutely everyone – young, old, healthy disabled, male female, everyone from gay and lesbian couples to dangerous children from Central America - finds welcome around the table. Always we are called to the risky move outward, a crossing of borders, an opening of doors. And when that happens, "The face of all the world is changed..." It really is!

In the United Church of Christ, we like to say that God is still speaking, that God is still alive and at work in our midst. If that is true, and I believe it is, then there is so much more to come. And so, my friends, as we look ahead to the next 125 years, let us dare to stand out, stand apart, as individuals and as a family of faith; dare to stand apart as persons who follow a Savior, a Liberator, who dared to see another way, indeed a whole new world, and continually invites us to join him there. Let us be people who dare to uncover God's fingerprint beneath of dust of our busy and often tumultuous lives.

A former colleague and friend, David Rees, died not long ago. I would like to close with some words of his: "In the face of life's questions and only partial answers – scary answers, confusing answers – there is within me a presence, a force, calling me always beyond a particular security, role, place, to go where I must go and be who I must be. And behind the questions, behind the power, at the root of my existence, is a voice and an invitation..." "Follow me."