

On the Occasion of the 145th Anniversary
of First Covenant Church, Minneapolis

“The Best is Yet to Come”
(Det bästa är kvar)

(Psalm 119:57-64)

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Introduction

1. Happy 145th *Anniversary* First Covenant Church! Or, is it Happy 145th *Birthday* First Covenant Church. Happy birth-ver-sary? Happy anni-versi-day? Annual celebrations can be unusual and quirky for Churches because theologically speaking churches are people and not buildings, but buildings express a certain kind of personality of the people who gather in them. Churches are “birthed” because they are officially launched by a group of people. So, today *is* a birthday. And, yet churches have anniversaries too, because, well, they can tend to stick together through good and bad like some long-time married people.

Birthday, anniversary, whatever we choose to call it, today is an important moment in the sweep of our congregation’s long history and everyone here is a meaningful part of that history. And, everyone here is invited to be a joyful part of what is yet to come because we really believe the best is yet to come. As with all of the human experience—our past informs our future, but the future is completely of our making with the help of God and the courage of willing souls.

2. The Scripture I have chosen for today is from the Hebrew portion of the Bible, Psalm 119. Psalm 119 is a shared holy text with the Jewish tradition and is like a religious relationships safety pamphlet as well as a historically significant text for the Covenant movement as well. Many scholars consider Psalm 119 a “wisdom psalm” because it reads much like other Hebrew wisdom literature in Scripture. Psalm 119:57-64

“You are my portion, O LORD; I have promised to obey your words. I have sought your face with all my heart; be gracious to me according to your promise.

I have considered my ways and have turned my steps to your statutes. I will hasten and not delay to obey your commands. Though the wicked bind me with ropes, I will not forget your law. At midnight I rise to give you thanks for your righteous laws.

I am a friend to all who fear you, to all who follow your precepts. The earth is filled with your love, O LORD; teach me your decrees.”

Psalm 119:57-64
NIV Translation © 1984

In the video that we created for today's "birth-ver-sary" I described three shared characteristics of the origins of First Covenant Church and what we aspire to today: That we are "Mission Friends," Entrepreneurial, and Community focused. Let's discuss the community focus first.

A. Community Focused

1. Our Scripture excerpt from Psalm 119 speaks of personal total commitment to God and the ways of God as we understand them and need to continue to learn about them. I love the warm relationship language the psalmist uses in these verses: "You are my portion, O Lord...I have sought your face with all my heart...be gracious to me...at midnight I rise to give thanks....The earth is filled with your love, O Lord, teach me your decrees."

These words echo two very important and linked texts between Judaism and Christianity. In Judaism it is known as "The Shema" found in the Hebrew text Deuteronomy 6:4-5

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."

Deuteronomy 6:4-5
NIV Translation © 2012

In the New Testament of the Bible, Jesus referred to this passage as well as another selection from the book of Leviticus¹ when he said...

"'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Matthew 22:36-40
NIV Translation © 2012

2. With all of these Scriptures in mind and our shared historic commitment to community—a big question on my mind these days is whether or not one can dare to view faith in service of community through the lens of the high-risk-high-reward work of *love*? I have been a vocational Christian minister since 1991 serving small, medium, and large churches in suburban and urban settings. And, I have come to believe that faith communities of all sizes and religions sometimes intentionally and sometimes unwittingly complicate the simple idea of our faith being in service to the community. To be sure, some are astonishingly effective in assessing shared needs and working together with their broader communities to address those needs. Yet, far too many view their broader communities as "fix it" projects, assume what the needs may be, and then proceed in their work focused on targeted *religious* objectives more than bringing holistic benefit to the community.

What if faith in service to the community was less about fix it projects and assumptions and more about falling in love with the complex personality of our community? I have been captivated by the love of my spouse Holly for more than 30 years and I can assure you that neither her nor I have ever embraced any notion that we are projects to be fixed. And, yet we have both been able to work and find some success improving ourselves over time in the safe space of imperfect but

¹ Leviticus 19:18

authentically committed love. I realize that there are limits to applying a relational analogy to faith in service to the community. Yet, it is my experience that faith communities who have the courage and take the risk to fall in love with their communities above seeking to fix them are given the two gifts of deeper relationships and more meaningfully shared growth that stands the test of time.

3. There is catch, though. Jesus didn't speak in vague or esoteric metaphors when he taught that true love *always* comes with a cost. Sometimes a very high cost including the sacrificial death of some of our most precious ideals. That's the bad news. The good news as also taught by Jesus and espoused by a host of other religious traditions is that the best ideals that do the greatest good for the most people are those that go through an archetypal refining process of dying to their narrow self-serving focus in order to be resurrected as an ever-widening embrace of that which matters to *all* of us.
4. I have spent much time pouring over the archives of our Swedish Tabernacle's origins and ideals as well as the death and resurrection of some of our most *cherished* ideals that have happened in every succeeding generation. Our current life cycle in the long life of the church is no exception. Amidst the litany of community good that have been accomplished through this church we have also experienced tremendous loss and excoriating refinement of our ideals as well.

At times, the unnervingly persistent and repeated pattern of our courageous decisions being sifting by complexity and failures and only occasionally reaching breakthroughs and success—the travail of it all has felt hauntingly similar to the Greek mythological figure Sisyphus (do you remember what Sisyphus was forced to do for all eternity?) who was relegated to pushing a rock up a hill for all of eternity. There is one important difference between us and Sisyphus, though. We were not being punished. Rather, we were and are being invited to learn, imperfectly, that faith in service of community comes with exacting and sacrificial expectations over the long arc of time.

Dare we view faith in service of community through the lens of the high-risk-high-reward work of love? I say yes. And, many of you have said yes. Thank you for saying yes! And, for teaching me to say yes. We are community focused.

Second, we are, like those who started our congregation 145 years ago, *entrepreneurial*.

B. Entrepreneurial

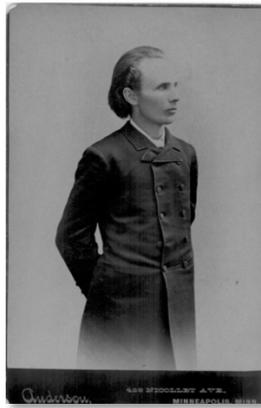
1. The part of today's text that speaks to me about faith-based entrepreneurialism is the portion that reads:

I have considered my ways and have turned my steps to your statutes. I will hasten and not delay to obey your commands. Though the wicked bind me with ropes, I will not forget your law. At midnight I rise to give you thanks for your righteous laws.

Psalm 119:59-62
NIV Translation © 1984

Clarity, courage, timing, struggle with opponents, and all with little sleep because our passion keeps us up at night. That's pretty much summarizes the spirit of entrepreneurialism to me! This may not come as a huge surprise to some here, but I have some colleagues of mine who have

called me a “serial entrepreneur.” Several years back an intern on First Covenant staff said I was like a “lion with squirrel like tendencies.” I’m sorry dear friends, for being such a strange combination of many things! But, I am in good and strange company when it comes to other pastors of First Covenant, including Eric August Skogsbergh...



...the second lead pastor who served our church community from 1884-1909.

2. One of the first times that First Covenant Church modelled a high risk entrepreneurial spirit was in 1884 when Skogsbergh first arrived. In a personal memoir Skogsbergh wrote this:

Chapter 4 “Moving to Minneapolis”

The moving was undertaken the first days in January 1884. Now I was no longer alone. I had a wife and three children, two girls and a little boy only a few weeks old. A rather severe Minnesota winter received us.

[I did some research on the average temperature in Minnesota, January 1884 and the high for the first few weeks was 8 degrees Fahrenheit...and the low was 32 below zero.²]

But one may not believe that it was only the winter that received us, but also a dear circle of friends whom I was almost as well acquainted as with the church I had left in Chicago, because, as I have mentioned before, I visited Minnesota almost yearly since my first visit in 1877 and, at times, I stayed for weeks and months to preach.

A committee had been appointed the previous fall to gather money for the new tabernacle. How had it succeeded? Well it was not long before I met this committee to find out how they had succeeded. With sorrow and a downcast spirit the brethren reported that they had not succeeded at all, simply because they expected me to take hold of the matter when I arrived.

Now I understood very well that I had gotten an elephant on my back, as the saying goes. We were in the midst of prayer week and the weather was severe. But there was nothing else to do but to take hold. So much the more because those who were *against* building the Tabernacle on the intended lot (they preferred a location further south about 25th Avenue and 24th Street) had managed to insert a troublesome condition in the motion to build. This

² http://home.att.net/~minn_climo/MSP1884.gif (accessed 1-22-10)

condition was that if we did not have \$5,000 subscribed at the congregational meeting in February, it would be seen as if it were not God's will to build on this lot.

[By the way \$5,000 in 1884 would be equivalent to a little more than \$1.4 million dollars in 2019...³]

I had therefore to hurry myself and help our Lord so that his will could be realized. Just think how even God's friends can act so foolishly, because it is apparent that the condition was the fruit of foolishness. I had to hire horses between times and drive around so that things would move. One day I got hold of a balky horse that wanted to turn around and go home which made me wonder whether it was Satan or God who sought to hinder us. But nothing could hinder us now.

The poor, long-bearded old man, brother Sallberg, who was with me, almost froze to death where he sat holding the horse. One must remember that at the time, almost all of the Minneapolis friends were poor so that one could not expect large sums. We hardly dare look at the list, how much we had received each day---but only hurried to gather in.

When the day had arrived, and the meeting was opened, you might know that everyone sat on a hot stone. Each side with tense attention while we counted. When we had gone through the list it was evident that it was God's will that the Tabernacle should be built on the corner of 7th Street and 8th Avenue south, because we had, if I remember correctly, \$5,500 or a little more---this several hundred above the required amount.

I respect the brethren who had conceived this condition, because when they saw how the subscription had succeeded, they conceded and the project became one of unity.

I question if any other mission church in America has been built on such conditions. But we were still at the small beginning. How would we succeed at last? Well, in this matter many of the brethren harbored fears. I do not blame them for that. Because it must be admitted that, seen from a cold business point of view it was a foolish undertaking and would never succeed. Because to begin with the lot cost \$16,500 [equivalent to about 4.7 million today]. In the second place most of our people were laborers and work was scarce. In the third place the church we planned would cost from \$50,000 to \$75,000. [An equivalent of between \$14 to \$22 million dollars in today's money]⁴

3. As crazy as all of that sounds, there are some who were here ten years ago when I arrived, and there was a half a million-dollar annual budget deficit and we were three years to bankruptcy. The only way forward was high risk entrepreneurialism, which we did, and which has not really ever subsided even after we closed the budget gap in 2016 and eradicated all of our debt in 2018. And, like in the early 1900's when this community put a huge log on the platform and hand sawed off small slices every time \$1,000 was raised to reduce debt or pay for this or that initiatives.

Or, like when a huge thermometer was hung from the wall and the temperature gauge was raised as the campaign was advanced for something audacious—it is very likely that we will continue to

³ <http://www.measuringworth.com/calculators/uscompare/result.php#> (Accessed 10-04-19)

⁴ E.A. Skogsbergh, *Memories and Personal Experiences During my Ministry of More than Fifty Years*, Translated by Eric G. Hawkinson, 1972. IV-2 through 5

be as dynamic and risk taking because—while being 145 years old, we do not have any large endowments and need to continue to be scrappy to follow through on what we believe is our best effort for the love of God and our community in our time.

4. By the way, pastors who leave an entrepreneurial mark on the church can, from time to time, have their name attached to various oddities around the building like a very famous pothole that used to be in our old back parking lot...



...has been affectionately named, for years, the Skogsbergh pothole! Brian Ogren, the First Covenant Managing Director tells me that we could put sand in this pothole and cover it with asphalt every day of the year, and this hole would return. Rumor has it that when Frana Construction excavated the back lot in September to put in a new water run off system, they had to remove several bicycles and even cars that had fallen into the Skogsbergh pothole, never to return. No human remains, though. Thank goodness!

Community focused. Entrepreneurial. And, finally, Mission Friends.

C. Mission Friends

1. In 1885, at the founding organizational meeting of the Evangelical Covenant, the denomination that our church and a handful of others founded, there was a sermon preached before the vote to organize focused on Psalm 119:63 “I am a friend to all who fear you.” Eight years later at the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893 there were some Christians protesting the Parliament of World Religions as the “hand tool of Satan.” The Covenant saw no reason for such dualities and participated in the Parliament and presented a paper introducing itself to the myriad of other world religions.
2. Pointing again to today’s Scripture, the Psalmist writer of today’s text calls all believers in God to urgently and thoughtfully focus on the ways of God regardless of the actions of others “who would bind us with ropes.” And, it is essential to point out that *every religious tradition* has camps of the wicked that seek to “bind us with ropes.”

Of the Abrahamic traditions (which comprise more than fifty percent of the world’s population): Christianity has fundamentalism. Islam has radicalization. Judaism has Haredi (charadeee) fundamentalism. I have taken time to learn from leaders of local synagogues and mosques about these extremes where we discussed how the dogmatic edges of our faith are typically unwilling to

bend, or unwilling to honor the spectrum of beliefs in our own traditions. Furthermore, the extreme edges of our faith are consistently aggressive toward other faith traditions.

3. Sadly, and in some surprising ways, American Evangelicalism that may have been known for more moderate postures in the past, has in recent decades bound itself to parts of the Christian fundamentalist movement *to its own peril*. Increasing amount of Christ followers are stepping away. Some have stepped away from Christian religion entirely. Some of us are staying engaged with our religious tradition but are simply choosing to leave behind the 20th century term “evangelical” that is rife with misapplication in favor of choosing to emphasize the life, ethics, and teachings of Jesus, which is the hierarchy of truth in our Scriptures and the center point of our faith as we are to live it out in our day to day lives.

It is interesting to be a historic congregation in the Covenant movement that pre-dated, then started and undergirded a denomination who’s leadership and delegates chose to, in 2019 at its 134th Annual meeting, excommunicate us, one of the few historic congregations that sustained it for so many decades. This last June was more painful than we anticipated. It was personally and communally excruciating. It was devastating for so many of you here, and our allies across the United States. And, with a little distance we can see that it has become an emancipation because in the moment the they chose to excommunicate, they left themselves. In that moment they ceased to be the historic Covenant movement of Mission Friends and became something else.

4. So, where do we go now? We are a congregation birthed in the Covenant tradition that immigrated to the United States in the late 1800’s. We were originally independent because of the exclusion imposed by the Lutheran State Church of Sweden which didn’t permit people to study their Bibles in their homes. And, now today, once again we are independent in a moment of reset because of the exclusions of the American Evangelical Church.

Where do we go?

Conclusion

We go forward. As community focused, entrepreneurial group of Mission Friends we keep going forward because *the best is yet to come!*

- We go forward because on our “anni-versi-day” our commitment to Christ and neighbor feels more like 145 years *young* than 145 years *old* and there is so much more Mission Friend and compassion, mercy and justice work to be done. As Dr. Martin Luther King Junior wrote to rebuke white Christian ministers while sitting in a jail in Birmingham, Alabama: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”⁵
- We go forward because Jesus taught us that we are blessed when people insult us, persecute us, and falsely say all kinds of evil against us because of our inclusive love of Christ for others.
- We go forward because of the power of love surging in our hearts for all people. As the famous William Shakespeare wrote in sonnet 116:

⁵ <https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Letter-from-Birmingham-Jail/quotes/> (accessed 10-4-19)

Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
O no, it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.⁶

- We go forward because we, like the writer of the new Testament letter of Hebrews wrote to encourage battered first century Christ followers, are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses through the ages and even today. Witnesses like Pastor Beth Earnest from Redeemer Covenant Church in Caledonia, Michigan. One of hundreds of people and churches who have sent love and encouragement to us in light of the violence of the 2019 Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Covenant Church. And, she sent this to us a week ago:

September 27, 2019

Dear Mission Friends of First Covenant Church Minneapolis,

Congratulations on 145 years of ministry to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. You have been an example and witness to faithfulness in God, compassion for the immigrant and stranger, and a church that has consistently produced leaders in the wider Body of Christ. May God bless you in days ahead with these words from our brother and Covenant legend, Nils Frykman, so closely associated in later years with the “Swedish Tabernacle” in Minneapolis:

Min framtidsdag är ljus och lång,
den räcker bort om tidens tvång.
Där Gud och Lammet säll jag ser
och ingen nöd skall vara mer.

I have a future all sublime,
beyond the realms of space and time,
Where my Redeemer I shall see,
and sorrow nevermore shall be.

In Christ,
Pastor Beth Ernest

We go forward, my mission friends, because we have a future where the best is yet to come.

Prayer

God of all, in all, and for all—we arrive at today’s momentous occasion with a sense of gratitude. Given all that we have been through over the last five years, ten years, really 50 years, it is amazing to make it here by your grace and the astonishing courage and generosity of so many. Our hearts are

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sonnet_116 (accessed 10-4-19)

full of love for you, for our neighbors, and for our world. Give us the courage, the clarity, and the clear sense that we, right now, are a meaningful part of the sweep of our congregation's long history and a joyful part of what is yet to come.

In Jesus Name. Amen.

Benediction

On this 145th Birth-ver-sary and Anni-versi-day and as our new week begins, may we take in these words written for the occasion of our congregation's 100th year of life together:

“Our story is the story of God's grace poured upon just one of his many congregations...it is the story of redemption...it is the story of fellowship...it is the story of missions...it is the story of faithful preaching...it is the story of life's unchanging and yet ever changing drama in birth, life, and death...it is a story full of glorious intangibles: prayers that were never uttered from the pulpit or recorded in any official “minutes”...hopes that kept the future from turning to emptiness when the situation was dark and dangerous, sacrifices that rated no publicity and drew no applause, resolutions that help people to their course when it would have been easy to turn back...it is the story of common people in love with Jesus Christ”

Go in Peace. And, go out as common and extraordinary people in love with Jesus Christ. Amen.