

November 8, 2015



“What Does Love Look Like? 140 and Growing!”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

John 15:9-13

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 Father's 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 must go on living in my love.” We’ve been hearing that verse read week after week so that it resonates deep in our minds and in our hearts. “You must go on living in my love,” Jesus commands in a voice as loud and clear today as it was when first spoken. Now these words sound as a clarion call to the First United Methodist Church of Santa Monica as we celebrate 140 years of faithful ministry and mission and push forward to embrace all that God has in store for us as the future unfolds before us..

140 years! Do you know that we are as old as the City of Santa Monica and the oldest congregation in this community? The Presbyterians challenge me on this from time to time because they started a Sunday School class in Santa Monica in September of 1875. I’ll give them that. BUT it was Methodists who founded the first congregation in October of that same year.

Yep. There were eight of them. Eight crazy, faithful Methodists with a vision of what could be. What should be here, in this beach outpost miles from anywhere. Several of them lived in tents, alongside other workers. They first met in Brady’s Hardware Store, but after three months Mr. Brady informed them that they’d have to move out as his wife and family were coming from out East to join him. Our first pastor, Rev. Joseph Crum, and his faithful few got to work. They persuaded the Santa Monica Land and Water Company to donate two plots of land and pulled together enough money to build a 20x25 foot church at the corner of 6th and Arizona that was dedicated just six weeks later.

They didn’t have a bell tower, but they had a bell. A handbell. Here it is---RING!

They wouldn’t have a real big church bell until 1883—and you know what? It’s the same bell that rings every Sunday up in our bell tower calling people to fellowship, to worship, to know the love of God.

They faced challenges right from the get go. There was a drought, a smallpox epidemic, a downturn in the economy. And those who had envisioned Santa Monica as the harbor for the growing city of Los Angeles were sorely disappointed when San Pedro was chosen instead.

It was hard to persevere. In 1892, when Rev. Stevenson wanted to call on parishioners way up in Malibu, it was at two-day trip, because he had to wait until the tide went out and the roads cleared. They faced external challenges and internal conflicts as well. During Prohibition, almost half of the 53 members left in protest because, in their mind, the Methodist weren’t taking a strong enough stand on Prohibition. Later, when they’d grown and moved to this site at 11th and Washington, a large faction of the congregation fought to keep the property at 4th and Arizona to use it as a community and educational center. Almost split them apart again. As they continued to expand and grow, they disagreed over appropriate levels of indebtedness. They quarreled, they disagreed deeply about all kinds of things, but the original commitment and vision was maintained. They persevered. What does love look like? This is tough love, seasoned and honed by adversity without and within, challenges they created themselves sometimes, and challenges that came from changes in the larger society.

They kept on keepin’ on. 140 years. You know, in the Bible, numbers signify deeper meaning. When you read a number in Scripture, you need to ask yourself what that number is really telling you. 140 is pretty interesting. Abraham was 140 when he married his second wife. What can I say? That’s what it says in Genesis. Job, that poor guy, after all his trials and tribulations, lived 140 more years, long enough to see his children and his children’s children unto four generations into the new future God was creating. In the Bible, 140 signifies longevity, perseverance, stamina, fortitude, and the on-going gift of the grace and power of God, bringing forth new life, new possibilities, new generations. What does love look like? A future with hope.

I don’t have time today to tell all the great stories of 140 years of ministry and mission in this place. There are so many. But let me share just a couple more because they testify to the past and point to the future. At one point, our city was growing, and this congregation saw a need for a new church to serve South Santa Monica. Thus, the South Santa Monica Methodist Church was created, now the Church in Ocean Park.

Later they saw the city expanding to the east and a new need for educational settings for children and youth and so established the East Santa Monica Methodist Church, which became Grace Methodist, and later merged with First. In the late 1950’s, when the conference mission structure changed, First Methodist embraced the congregation of the Santa Monica Mexican Methodist Church, as witnessed here still today in Connie Casillas and the Casillas family.

And of course, in many of our memories, when the need was great to serve the homeless and low income seniors, this congregation moved heaven and earth to create Upward Bound House on what was our parking lot, now one of the most respected programs in the metropolitan area, having helped over 1900 children transition from homelessness to permanent housing.

Our history is one of staying alert to changing times and changing needs and taking steps to respond. Our history is one of change and flexibility, adapting to a community that never stands still. Do you know what the great and controversial innovation was in 1900, just 25 years into our story? It was the use of offering envelopes, a new idea designed to simplify the accounting process. Now we're looking at on-line giving and mobile apps and things our predecessors could never have envisioned.

Our history is one of daring great things for God. Not all of them worked. Not all of them played out as envisioned. But through it all this congregation and its pastors have stayed open to the new things God was doing, always seeking to be generous and faithful and creative and visionary.

Through it all, as you read our history, you'll also find recurring things that stay pretty constant: Sunday School, the study of Scripture, prayer, music, preaching, worship, mission trips, financial challenges, major gifts and piggy bank crusades, stewardship of income and time, community service, education of children and youth, potluck dinners, picnics and barbeques, impact on the life of the city, commitment, and love for one another and for this whole community. It's as if that commandment of Jesus—"you must go on living in my love"—is the warp and weft of the tapestry of life that is Santa Monica First United Methodist Church.

You must go on...now what? Well...we've gone from impassable roads to electric cars to freeways to gridlock to bicycles and the new light rail. We've gone from the original economic base of this area—do you know what it was?—farming of barley and lima beans. Yep. Apparently lima bean loafs got a lot of families through the Depression. Farming and—you guessed it! Film-making. Where are we today? Farm-to-table menus. Urban gardens. Rain barrels mandatory with every new construction or major home refurbishment. Who are we today? No longer the middle class mecca where families could come and work for aerospace and buy a little home for their family and go to great schools. Oh, we still have great schools, and film-making, but we now have nearly the highest home costs in America and we have become Silicon Beach, a hub for major tech companies and venture capital start-ups. Yet, a city where homelessness is increasing as well as food insecurity among families and seniors.

What is God calling us to see? What are the needs...of the hipsters and techies flocking here for jobs? Of the families pulled in a million directions by activities and opportunities too numerous to count? What are the longings of folks living long distances from family and childhood friends? How do we provide for the needs of the homeless as we face into the rains of an El Niño winter? Of the homeless kids in our schools? Of seniors who live alone? Of neighbors who are affluent in material things, yet still hungry for God, for meaning and purpose, for values not measured in dollars and cents?

What does church look like, feel like, act like in Santa Monica in 2015? 2016? 2155, 140 years from now?

We've got a number of new initiatives underway that you'll be hearing more and more about—simple church, Messy Church, Sacred Yoga, community meals at Family Shelter, the Thanksgiving Meal here in Simkins Hall for residents of Family Shelter and Family Place. And we've got those things that seem to remain important, tried and true—Sunday School, Bible study, fellowship groups, mission trips, generous giving of money and time, scholarships, counseling, pastoral care, welcoming and inspiring facilities, community outreach, powerful worship....so be in prayerful consideration of your financial pledge for 2016 and our 140+ Stretch Goal to move us towards fully funding our staff team.

What does love look like? It continues to look like God's faithful people, strong and resilient, flexible and innovative, trustworthy and brave, daring to go on living in God's love.

RING BELL

May God bless us for another 140 years with compassion, courage, conviction, and unwavering hope.

Thanks be to God.

Notes:

Based on the histories of Santa Monica First UMC written by Jerry Brown.

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First United Methodist Church • 1008 Eleventh Street Santa Monica, CA 90403

www.santamonicaumc.org ■ 310-393-8258