

You may have noticed that our banners featuring the names of God came down this week. I loved doing that Lent/Easter Sermon Series on God's Names. It was with sadness that I had them taken down this week.

To be reminded week after week that God is Healer, Listener, Shepherd, Strong Friend was a blessing for me. But all good things must be replaced by more good things. So we took them down.

I want to say thank you to Jane Stoutland and Lisa Sander for designing and making our Names of God banners. They did a great job, they hardly ever got mad at me when I changed the names the order I wanted them in, and 50% of the time they took my phone calls! When you see Jane and Lisa tell them thank you.

"Why did you start this church?" Bill Hybels, pastor of Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago, remembers the time when that church was just planted and was struggling to grow. Hybels tells of a man who came to a worship service in those early days and asked after the service, "Why did you start this church?"

Hybels said, "I feel the love of Christ can transform people's lives. I feel that if people can just hear of the power of God and the love of God presented in a way they can relate to, then people's hearts and lives will change."

The man he was talking to looked at him with a pitying look. "Look," the man said, "I have been running a legal practice for 20 years and this much I can tell you with great authority: People don't change. They just don't... If you have any radical ideas about transforming people's lives, you are setting yourself up for massive disappointment because it just does not happen." And the man walked away.¹

Why was this church started? That is a great question for us as we prepare to celebrate this Fall the big 1-3-0.

On Sunday, October 7, we are going to celebrate Pontoppidan's 130th birthday. On that day a former pastor – Norm Anderson – will be here to share a message with us. All the musical groups will be primed and ready to lead us in worship.

We will make sure the place is all spruced up. Maybe we will have some balloons!
 We will have some birthday cake – I hope it is that carrot cake! On October 7 we will celebrate that Pontoppidan began 130 years ago as a place of ministry.

130 years:

- A place can get pretty old and decrepit after 130 years.
 - A program can lose the joy of its beginnings after 130 years.
 - An organization can start coasting after 130 years.
 - A place can become pretty concerned about its own aches and pains after 130 years.
 - The vision of why it started can become a little blurry after 13 decades.
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Pontoppidan began as a place of ministry:

- A place where people gather to worship God.
 - A place to grow in discipleship
 - A place to serve as the caring hands of Christ.
 - A place to invite others to be a part of the fellowship.
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Pontoppidan began 130 years ago as a place of ministry. A pastor once said:
 “Sometimes when a church has had a great past, it does not believe it can have an even greater future.”² That was from a pastor of a church which was only celebrating 30 years. We will be celebrating 130 years.

This church has had a great past ministry. I look sometimes at pictures from Pont’s past: huge church picnics, incredible group Sunday School pictures, marvelous mission project stories, rigid looking past pastors! [I think it was those stiff collars that used to wear!]

There is a great history. And none of us who love this church and where it has been want this statement to be true: “Sometimes when a church has had a great past, it does not believe it can have an even greater future.”

The time is here for God – for God – to do even more work and ministry through this church. It is time to be open for what God wants to do:

- This is a place for weary business people to come and rest and be restored and get filled with integrity, ready to face the world again.
 - This is a place for students to step away from the frantic and frenzied pace of their lives and go –“phewww.” And for the Holy Spirit to go, “whewww.”
 - This is a place for families under the pressure cooker called “modern family life” to sit together and pray together and sing together in a worship time.
 - This is a place where single mom’s and single dad’s can find some strength for the particular challenges of their lives.
 - This is a place where people nearing the end of the journey of life can hear words of hope for the next part of the journey.
 - This is a place where everyone who needs to repent can find the words to do that, where everyone who needs to know that God loves them can feel that, where everyone who needs a “do-over” can start that do-over right here and right now. That is our God given purpose for why we exist.
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And I believe that God has a greater future for Pontoppidan. That means that there is going to be more healing and more hope and more mending and more open doors: more God moments and God stories.

God wants every church to be like the church pictured in Acts. Our NT reading for today is from that Letter. It is about Peter. But I want to invite us to picture a quick overview of Paul and Peter as seen in Acts 9-11.

In those chapters the life of Paul and the life of Peter are turned upside down and inside out. Every church that is going to have a great future following Jesus Christ needs stories like those found in Acts 9 – 11.

Acts 9 is about Paul and transformation.

Paul – or Saul as he was then known – had a mission. His mission was to destroy the church of Jesus. It is right there in Acts 8:3. Read the verse out loud with me that is on the screen: *“Saul was going everywhere to destroy the church.”*

Saul needed to be transformed; changed. Have you ever known someone who you thought would never, ever change?

- A classmate who is always going to pick on you?
- A neighbor who is also going to be cranky?
- A church member who is always going to be whiny?
- A family member who is always going to be satisfied with the wide and easy path which leads to destruction?

Have you ever given up on someone because you thought they were beyond hope and change? So you leave them out of your prayers. You write them off as lost beyond hope.

- Have you ever gotten up in the morning, looked in the mirror, and said, “God, I really need to change?”
- Have you ever come home at night and sat on the front steps and had an honest one on one with yourself and said, “God, this life this way can not go on?” You feel like change is impossible for you.

The word used there at the beginning of each sentence – the word “God” – “God, I really need to change.” “God, this life this way can not go one.” That word – “God” – is the key word and the key actor in transformation.

No one thought Saul could change. He was going to destroy churches all of his life. He was going to keep dragging good people off to bad prisons. He left for Damascus one day to destroy another church.

Along the way... You know the story. A bright light... Saul fell to the ground... And a voice he never expected to hear said, *“I am Jesus.”*

Saul was transformed. Transformation begins with hearing the words: *“I am Jesus.”* From that moment on Saul was on a new path. He was a builder of churches. He believed that Jesus was alive and well and changing people’s lives for the good – beginning with his.

Churches with great futures believe that Jesus speaks. Churches with great futures believe that Jesus changes people. No one is beyond is hope.

If you, or someone you know, is feeling like nothing can change and nothing will work and there is no point, read with them Acts 9. And when you get to verse 5 read the words, “I am Jesus” several times.

Circle the words and highlight them. There is the power of transformation. We believe that God continues to do transformations.

Acts 10-11 is about Peter and invitation.

This is a great story with God’s hand all over it. Relive the story with me...

- Cornelius is over here in Caesarea. He is devout and gives generously – but he does not know Jesus.
- Peter is over here in Joppa. He knows Jesus, but will have nothing to do with people like Cornelius. You see, Peter is a Norwegian, and Cornelius is a Swede. Never the two shall meet. But God... Let’s see what God does!
- God sends an angel to Cornelius. The angel tells Cornelius that he needs to send for Peter the Norwegian to help him out. Cornelius is ready to have doors opened for him, so he sends for “Peter-son.”
- God comes to Peter in a vision. In the vision God tells Peter to eat what he has been told is unclean. Peter does not understand the vision at first. But the vision prepares him to accept the mission to go and befriend and eat with Cornelius the Swede.
- So Petersen [-sen] went and visited Corneliuson [-son]. Peter shared the message of Jesus: “...that there is peace with God through Jesus Christ...”
[Acts 10:36]

Thank you for putting up with my using the Norwegian/Swedish thing. It opens us up to understanding the whole Jewish/Gentile thing.

You see, Peter was leaving a whole generation of people out of the promise and hope of Jesus Christ.

God speaks to me about. Who am I leaving out of the hope and promise of Jesus?

- As I get older, am I leaving younger people out of receiving the Gospel?
- Since I am musically inclined, am I leaving out people who are sports inclined?
- Since I live in MHD, do I care less about sharing the Gospel with West Fargo?
- As I become more financially solvent over time, am I leaving out the poor?

Who is the Cornelius' whom God loves and cares for whom I have turned a blind eye to? As Peter said to Cornelius, *"God has shown me that I should no longer think of anyone as impure or unclean."* [Acts 10:38]

What Acts 9 – 11 means for us is this: By the grace of God we have the story of Paul and Peter and Cornelius in our lives as well.

- Like Paul, we have been transformed by grace. Jesus has stepped into our days saying, "I am Jesus."
 - Like Cornelius, we have been made a member of God's family by invitation. Peter's have come to us and shared the invitation.
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Remember the man who said: "I can tell you with great authority: People don't change. They just don't..."?

The Gospel says the opposite. Jesus comes into our lives and says, *"I am Jesus."* Jesus through Transformation and Invitation changes people. Every Sunday we begin a new week knowing and believing that Jesus changes people. To God be the glory for what he will do this week. Amen.

¹ Sermon by Bill Hybels, "When God Rocks Your World." 9/9/2006

² Ibid.