

SERMON: Forward, By Faith

TEXT: Hebrews 11:29 – 12:2

Many of you have probably heard or read about the recent collaboration of St. Francis Foundation and St. James AME Church to provide permanent, independent housing for chronically homeless men over the age of 50. The result of being unsheltered for so is a sharp decline in physical health. Their medical conditions often go untreated and are worsened by diet, overexertion, heat, and addiction.

The Pastor at St. James, Rev. Renita Green, is a friend and colleague of mine, and this is a vision she's had for a long time. I remember her telling me about it months ago, as she pointed out an old house that was for sale. Her dream was to buy it and make it a home for some of the men she's gotten acquainted with at the People's Shelter, an emergency cold-weather overnight shelter that she started at St. James a couple of years ago.

“That would be wonderful,” I said. Then I started asking questions. “Will they be paying to rent a room? Won't they need supervision? How will you... What happens if... Who's going to....”

“I don’t have all the answers,” she replied. “I don’t know how it’s going to work. I just know it needs to happen. And I need to find others who will share my vision and can help me figure out how to make it happen.”

Sure enough, as she shared the story with others, someone would say, “I think you should contact this person.” Or “Let me talk to so-and-so about this.” People were connected. Emails were sent back and forth. Text messages and phone calls were made. Meetings took place. Conversations happened.

The first home – named the Peaceful Place – will have four men moving in the first of September. And there’s a second house that needs a lot of work, but similar plans are in the works to make it a home for those who have none.

Astounding is the best word I can find to describe this work. It is mind-boggling and miraculous how quickly all the pieces have fallen into place! And it is the perfect example of how one person can make a difference.

Are there still thousands of people, desperate and detained at our border? Still thousands more afraid of being deported? Still wealthy politicians and corporate executives who are not held accountable for their own crimes? Is there

still a climate crisis? A healthcare crisis? A growing culture of racism, hatred, and violence in our country? Yes. And too many more problems to add to this list. It's enough to make a person feel hopeless.

There's plenty of fear to go around. But, here in Cape Girardeau, Missouri, a short woman with a big voice and an infectious laugh, along with her tiny, little church, is saving lives. And loving out loud. And giving hope. And filling stomachs. And offering a home, and a bed, and peace. And she's not done. She's on her way to saving many more lives.

Not knowing all the answers, and not knowing how she would accomplish this overwhelming – and, according to some, *impossible* – task, Reverend Renita moved FORWARD, BY FAITH.

The passage we read from the Letter to the Hebrews does a wonderful job of reviewing or summarizing the ways in which so many of our ancestors in faith also accomplished impossible tasks. “By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were

disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace. And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.”

Our own ancestors in faith here at First Presbyterian in Cape Girardeau moved this church and this community FORWARD IN FAITH in ways that perhaps they never even imagined they could. Chateau Girardeau, a transitional residence for older adults in varying levels of independence, is just one among many historical and noteworthy accomplishments of this congregation. The recent completion of our Peace Park is another example of something that was once just a dream.

And I need you to hear this: **we are not finished yet.**

You know, Charlie Wiles, who was on the search committee that hired me, likes to tell me – with tongue in cheek – that I signed a contract to be your pastor for twenty years! We laugh about it, and I take it in the spirit which it is given: as

a compliment. But even more than that, I take it as a challenge. It is a big challenge, to be sure. The church, in general, is changing so much. And this church, like so many others, is aging. We're simply not able to do as much as we used to. Some of you won't be here in twenty years; you'll be among our *cloud of witnesses* in heaven.

Furthermore, we don't know if the church will be here in twenty years. If it is, what will it look like? What will the world look like in twenty years? What will our presence mean to this community? What will the needs be in our community? What will be the focus, the essence of our ministry?

Will the waters part to allow us passage as they did for Moses and the Hebrew people? Will the hungry lions retreat? Will the fires that threaten to consume us be quenched?

So many questions; so few answers. Looking that far down the road, we don't even know if the road extends that far. But like Moses and Hebrews, we need to step FORWARD, BY FAITH. Like Daniel in the lion's den, we need to face our fears and move FORWARD, BY FAITH. Like Shadrack, Meshack, and

Abednego, though we feel the heat of the fiery furnace, we must stand together and continue FORWARD, BY FAITH, trusting that God has a plan for us.

The fear of stepping into the unknown can paralyze us. But we all have experience with this. We've all done this before.

We all can recall times in our lives when our world was turned upside down and the future we imagined suddenly crumbled before our eyes. We've all been in that place where we didn't know what to do, where we had only questions and no answers, where we realized that what came next was completely outside of our control. But we are all still here, because we moved FORWARD, IN FAITH.

We got out of bed, even when we felt like there was no reason to. And we drank a cup of coffee (or whatever gets you started). And we went out and faced a world we did not recognize. We stepped into the darkness and found that the sun still rises. And the river still flows. And God still works miracles. And God still loves us.

We can find encouragement from the second part of that passage in the Letter to the Hebrews. "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of

witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.”

I know, the metaphor of running a race doesn't fit my lifestyle either! But let's remember that God has set a path for us into the future. We may not know what that path looks like, but if we're intentional about keeping our faith, Jesus will be beside us every step of the way, and the cloud of witnesses will cheer us on.

Together, let us face our fears and keep moving FORWARD, BY FAITH...
to the glory of God!

AMEN.