

Preacher: Rev. Karen E. Gale
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June 16, 2019 Pilgrim Church UCC Rev. Karen E. Gale

Not Waiting for Godot
Acts 1:42-47

Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* is widely considered one of the most influential plays of the twentieth century. It follows two men down on their luck who sit around complaining about life and their own woes while waiting for the mysterious Godot to show up. Godot never appears, only a boy who tells them at the end of each day, "not today, but surely tomorrow." And so the men resolve to wait again.

Over time there have been many interpretations of the play, including the fact that the word Godot is very close to the word God, and thus the play is about waiting for God to show up. (though the play was originally written in French and Godot and Dieu don't sound alike..).

But whatever lens one uses to understand the play, one thing is indisputable. The men are waiting. Waiting for Godot to show up and....what? Fix everything, change everything, make meaning in their lives? Give them direction? What? What are they waiting for? And why?

It is really appealing to wait for someone to show up to save us. Hence the huge popularity of superhero movies. And some Christians' focus on the Second Coming or Last Judgement when Jesus will show up and sort everything out.

But that's not what's happening in our scripture today. Last week the Holy Spirit came down in a rush of fire and wind and filled the gathering of people. They left amazed and went to spread the word of Jesus and his ministry back in their villages and towns. But not everyone left. Those who lived in Jerusalem or the neighboring towns were also filled with the Spirit. And they came to believe in Jesus.

And what did they do with that knowledge? Sit and wait for Jesus to show up again?

No. We get a very clear description of what this early gathering of people did. They pooled their money. They sold the stuff they didn't need. They ate together. They prayed together. They supported one another. They started the first churches.

And what was the church about? Waiting for Jesus? No. It was about living as Jesus lived. Was it waiting for someone else to tell them what to do? No. It was about being together in community. Being a place of loving kindness.

Now eventually Paul does have to help out and mediate some of the inevitable conflicts that arose. I mean, conflict, as we know, just means two or more conflicting ideas about how to do something.

But the church was about being a community together. Making sure needs were met. And out of that came a lot of joy. And love. And hope. So what can this say to us this morning?

Pilgrim church is waiting, right? You all are waiting for the Search Team and the arrival of a settled pastor. You are waiting for a new spiritual leader. You are waiting.

But what are you waiting for? For a solution to the challenges Pilgrim and other churches face? For a savior in the form of a pastor? Waiting for Godot, or Superman, or Jesus?

You know there was this one church that waited for the new pastor to arrive. They had high expectations. When he finally arrived three of the deacons decided to take him out fishing with them the following Saturday. They met and rowed out to the middle of the pond when they head deacon realized she hadn't brought her tackle box.

"Oh no. Now we'll have to row back to get it and back out again. My back can't take it."

"It's ok," said the new pastor. "I'll go get it."

He proceeded to step out of the boat and walk across the water to the bank and retrieve the tackle box.

"Figures," said another deacon. "The Search Team got us a pastor that can't even swim."

So, what are you all waiting for? Who are you waiting for? And what are your expectations? If you like the pastor, will you stay? And if you don't like them will you complain or will you go?

I invite you to take a moment to think about all the pastors that Pilgrim has had over the years. There have been many of them, at least 11 or 12 counting interims. Think back to the ones you have known. The ones you liked. The ones you didn't. Long tenures. Short tenures.

Now, think about the people at Pilgrim, all the folks who have been a part of this community over the years.

The truth is that while a pastor may be a visible face or presence at a church, the actual church is the people, the community, the folks engaged in the work of Jesus. You are the church, whether there is a pastor here or not. You all together are the essential part.

The people of the book of Acts had seen Jesus or had heard of Jesus or were touched by the Holy Spirit in the telling of the message of Jesus. And they got together to do five main things:

Share their possessions

Pray

Eat together

Take care of each other

Celebrate

No Jesus. No pastor. No head of the church. That all came much later. In the beginning, (and yes, still the case now), it was about the people. Together. Acting in loving kindness towards one another.

Jesus gave them the directions on how to love each other. Share. Forgive. Help. Include.

Jesus showed them how to eat together. Share. Remember God. Remember me and what we did together.

Jesus told them what to do: go out and make disciples of all nations. Love God and lay down your lives for each other. Take care of each other. Pray.

And Jesus died, rose, went back to heaven and left them to get on with it.

We have those same directions. This is what it means to be the church.

Share

Eat together

Pray

Celebrate

Take care of each other

You are the people you've been waiting for. No matter who speaks from this pulpit.

This is not to say that calling a new pastor isn't important. It is. It is a new chapter. This person will bring ideas and invite you to live your best lives.

But ultimately pastors come and pastors go. The congregation, the people, is what is central. It is the people. Look around. It is the people that are the church. And it is what you do together, not what some pastor does or does not do, that makes you the church.

I heard this story about church on The Moth, an NPR storytelling program.

Mark Redmond moved up to Vermont with his family several years back. Now Mark works with homeless and at risk kids in Burlington at a program called Spectrum. Kids who are addicted to drugs and alcohol, struggling with mental illness, runaways, caught in the legal system or otherwise need a place of support and care. Mark credits his religious beliefs as driving what he does.

As he walked around his new neighborhood after moving in he was invited by a neighbor to go to her church for the best contemporary service. When Mark asked another neighbor about it, the second neighbor said, "yeah. That's the Hollywood church."

"The Hollywood church?"

"Yes, everything is shiny and bright and happy."

Well, that was enough for Mark. It's not that he wasn't interested in church. He goes every week and considers himself a peace and justice Catholic. He says, "To me if you are going to be spiritual, be religious, it is about social justice. And the people I've always looked up to are MLK, Dorothy Day, Desmond Tutu. Their faith led them to action to try to save the world. Not Hollywood."

Now several weeks into the new job at Spectrum the organization got an email because a church school class at the big Hollywood church collected items to donate to Spectrum and they wanted someone to come to pick up the things and say a few words to the class.

Mark said, "I really didn't want to go. But I'm the director. I lived closer than anyone else at the agency. I'll have to go. So I show up and go inside. I'm going in with an attitude. I went in and said who I was and was directed to go up the stairs and where there is a classroom of kids waiting for me.

"I walk in and there are like 25 kids. Little kids like 8 and 9 years old. I gather them around and told them about Spectrum and the youth we serve. Then they brought up a box. Sheets, towels, soap, toothpaste. All the things that the program can use.

"There are some adults standing there who tell me there is a little girl named Emily who had something special and could she please come up to the front. This little girl comes up dragging a huge duffle bag. She said, 'My brother died this year and my family would like to give this to you to give to a boy.'

"I opened it up and inside it had some of the same stuff. Soap, sheets, toothpaste. And it had a white leather bound bible. There was a card in it. "It read To a young man at Spectrum. Always remember God is watching over you." There was a picture of brother pasted inside card.

"Now I was expecting a little boy. But this was a young man. Maybe 20 or 21 years old. Handsome, happy. Smiling in the picture.

"I leaned over to an adult and whispered. 'How did her brother die?'"

They whispered back: "Heroin overdose."

"Something shifted deep inside of me. I began to see things very clearly. It was a moment of awakening. First thing--my own blindness. My own prejudice. Maybe this church is not the kind of church that I prefer. But there are a lot of really good people in this church and some of them are in tremendous pain.

"And if this church is where they go to find peace and hope and healing, so what? What right do I have to judge that?"

What do we do as a church?

Share.

Eat together.

Pray.

Celebrate

Take care of each other.

Mark said to Emily, "You have my word. I want to give this to the right young man at Spectrum."

Back at work he did find the right man to give the bag to. It was a kid the program had taken in two years prior and the young man had done really well. At the end of the month he was moving to a technical college and to live in the dorm. He could really use this stuff. So the staff gave him the bag with the one condition that he write a thank you note, which he did. And they thought it was the end of the story.

But a few months later Mark got letter a letter that he would receive year after year at that time of year. In it the mother of the boy who had died wrote, "Today would have been my son's 21st (or 22nd birthday or 23rd). Enclosed was a check for \$250 and a list of her son's favorite restaurants.

"Please take a group of your boys out to dinner with this money. The thought of a group of boys going out having a good meal together, having a good time together, will do me good. I'm blessed to be doing this small thing."

Over time, the church became great partner to Spectrum. Food. Donations. Money. Mark said that in the end he surprised himself and went to Christmas pageant service.

"And was it Hollywood? Yeah. A cast of one hundred and drummers and singers and fake snow coming down. But after it was all over the folks at Spectrum packed my car with wrapped gifts for the kids at Spectrum." (The Moth, Holiday Special 2014)

It is not about the pastor. It is not about the building. It is not about whether the service is Hollywood or Congregational.

It is about the people. And how a church community comes together to:

Share.

Eat together.

Pray.

Celebrate

Take care of each other.

Look around. This is the church. The folks sitting near you and across the aisle. The folks at home praying with us. The people here giving their gifts of time and talents and connection. Yes, it will be wonderful to have a settled pastor come to be at Pilgrim. And yes, there are great

things that lie ahead. And eventually that pastor too will go and another will come and more great things will happen.

You are the church. Together. In Jesus' name. Amen.