

CHURCH AS BASE CAMP

I Corinthians 3:9-13

Ephesians 2:19-22

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24 April 2016

I want to begin this morning with a very brief history lesson. For some of you this will sound vaguely familiar; to others of you this will be new. In 1998, this congregation was worshiping in what is now our chapel. The room had bright blue carpet, blonde wood furniture, and cinder block walls. Some money had been given for sanctuary renovation. Due to the stock market, that money had grown significantly. We raised more money and beautified our worship space. We gutted the room, and that summer, we worshiped in the Fellowship Hall. We thought it would be a difficult summer but it turned out to be an exciting summer. Our worship attendance was great because each Sunday people came to see the progress that was being made. We put in new carpet, drywall, all new pews, and stained glass. We configured the chancel area so that we had flexibility. And we were thrilled with our new worship space. But almost immediately we had a problem.

Avon Lake was growing, and this congregation was growing. We loved the way our new sanctuary looked but it was too small. More Sundays than not, we had to set up chairs outside the sanctuary to accommodate all who were worshiping with us.

It was a good problem to have, to be sure, but still a problem. What to do? We'd just transformed the sanctuary. We'd raised money for it. How do we tell people that it's already inadequate? We spent the next several years talking about it. And as we talked about it, we continued to add more chairs. We hired consultants, we took surveys. We thought about expanding that room. We thought about building a satellite church in Avon. We talked, deeply and seriously and prayerfully, about what God was calling us to do. We explored

every option. There were committee meetings and there were large congregational meetings. Finally, about five years later, we decided that God was calling to us to grow, and that we needed to build a new and bigger sanctuary. It wasn't an easy decision. We knew it would mean significant financial challenges.

I am rehearsing this history because I think it's important for us to remember and restate our values as a congregation. We are a church that makes decisions as a body. We make them carefully, after looking at facts and figures. We make them after studying scripture and prayerfully discerning the presence of God in our life together. We make decisions with our head and with our heart, talking to one another about those spiritual nudges that we feel from time to time.

Around that time, we often joked about the line from the movie, "Field of Dreams" in which an Iowa farmer decides to build a baseball field on part of his farmland. He hears a voice which says to him, "If you build it, they will come."

(Show clip from movie.)

This congregation voted to take a giant leap of faith and build a new sanctuary. We didn't do it because we heard voices but we did believe that, if we made more space to share God's grace **(Tim, can you put that logo up on the screen?)**, people would come. Let's see how that has worked out. If you were NOT here before we built this new sanctuary, would you please stand?

Once the decision was made, we were again very thoughtful about the details. We interviewed several architects before choosing Tom Ziska, and we were thrilled with the experience of working with such a faithful and talented man. Mike Fowle and members of our Sanctuary Design Committee visited dozens of churches, took pictures of everything from chairs to lighting to Welcome Centers. Mike had stacks of notebooks full of pictures

from all of those visits. We then began making decisions about aesthetics and acoustics: how we wanted the church to look and how we wanted the church to sound.

Bob and Fran Fisher accepted the enormous responsibility of heading up our capital campaign, working with our paid consultant and many volunteers. They were patient and tireless as we proceeded through each stage of the campaign, raising over a million dollars.

Dave Witzigreuter offered to serve as the general contractor for the project, volunteering his time and expertise as a gift to the church. Dave was here constantly, and was the point person who dealt with the masons on the brickwork, the carpenters, the many contractors who had a part in the building of this room and all of the adjacent projects that took place at the same time. Dave often stood in this very space before it had walls, before it had a roof, and he would say to me, "Kelly, there's a special feel to this space."

Volunteers helped to involve every person in the church. We broke ground, we gave little yellow hard hats to our children, we put our sacred stones underneath the spot where our communion table now is, we signed the beam. People who had expertise in particular areas were of immense help, like Tom Coy with the HVAC. I can't possibly thank all of the people who were a part of the building of this sanctuary, but I do want to thank Mike Fowle, Bob and Fran Fisher, and Dave Witzigreuter for their gifts of time at a leadership level. Will you please join me?

We ended up spending over three million dollars on this sanctuary and the other improvements we made at the time – the brides room, renovated bathrooms, the new entrances, the Welcome Center, Family Lounge and Gathering Space. We have paid off more than 2/3 of that, with our remaining mortgage – as of today - under \$950,000. Is that still a lot? Yes. But am I extremely proud of how far we've come in 10 years? Absolutely. Many of us gave sacrificially to get us to this point, and let's give ourselves a round of applause!

And of course we've done a lot of ministry and mission in the past ten years, too, which I don't have time to talk about today in detail. We have added staff positions **(pictures of Tim and Nate and Kim Rose? If you have them)**, we have added new ministry and mission programs like IHN, we have built a youth center, we have expanded our worship opportunities.

So where do we go from here? Let me close with two comments about that.

First, there is an interesting trend in church life today. The trend is to do more ministry away from the building. Why? Because there are people who grew up in church who have been turned off by church, and there are other people who think they wouldn't be welcomed or feel comfortable in church. So church is going to them. There are Bible study classes happening in coffee shops and bars. When I attend preaching conferences these days, one of the most popular events is called "Beer and Hymns". Church people are going into the neighborhoods, finding out what the needs are, and setting up mission outposts there. Giving out water at a 5 K run, offering free haircuts to people who can't afford them before they go back to school or before a job interview, adopting families of soldiers, offering church in the park where homeless people spend their days. And on and on. It's ministry without walls, but not entirely. We still need the building. It is our sanctuary, after all, a sanctuary FROM the stress of life, a waypoint where we find our sense of direction. It is our base camp. It's where we come for spiritual nourishment, where we come to remember who and whose we are. As we worship together, study together, gather around tables together, we are nurtured and nourished by God's word and spirit. Our own spiritual wells are filled and refilled. We are equipped, then, to go back out into the world.

The church is base camp for you when you live your faith at work, offering an empathetic ear to a colleague. The church is base camp for the two members of this

congregation who started the Avon Lake Community Garden, a place where God's creation is being celebrated. The church is base camp for teachers who need to be centered before the new week begins, and for medical professionals who find themselves frazzled, for police officers and parents...all of us who long for more than just our own strength as we seek to live in the world with energy and integrity.

I predict that we will be doing more and more outside our walls in the years to come, but that – at the same time – we will be even more appreciative of our experience within them.

One last comment about what's next. It really is in the form of an announcement. Most of you know that we currently have an open staff position – that of Director of Christian Education. Scott Patterson is retiring from his position as well, as of June 1. The Personnel Committee and Church Council have discussed our current staffing situation at length, and they have decided that this is the time for us to look for a second minister, an Associate Minister for Children and Family. We are still writing the job description, but this person will be responsible for our Christian Education as well as other general ministerial duties. It is an exciting moment in the life of our church. It's another leap of faith. We will need to expand our personnel budget in order to find the best person possible. But we have been understaffed for some time, compared to most churches of our size and activity level. I am confident that we will rise to the challenge, as we have met every other challenge in our life together. Because we have discerned, with care and prayer, that God is leading us into this new future.

Please stand and join with me in our Litany of Thanksgiving.