

**04.28.24 ~ Easter 5**

**“Unity, Unified, United”**

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

**Luke 8:16-18 (ESV)**

<sup>16</sup> “No one after lighting a lamp covers it with a jar or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a stand, so that those who enter may see the light. <sup>17</sup> For nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light. <sup>18</sup> Take care then how you hear, for to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away.”

**Leader: These Are the Guiding Words of Jesus!**

**All: Thanks be to God!**

**Acts 2:42-47 (NIV)**

<sup>42</sup> They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. <sup>43</sup> Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. <sup>44</sup> All the believers were together and had everything in common. <sup>45</sup> They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. <sup>46</sup> Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, <sup>47</sup> praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

**Leader: These Are the Reassuring Words of God! All: Thanks be to God!**

**Please pray with me:**

Creative God, we are grateful this morning to celebrate 21 years together in your presence as The United Baptist Church. Help us to hear your words of unity in the early church that will continue to unify our vision and mission. As you transformed the early disciples and later apostles, we ask you to transform us now as we listen to words of encouragement and challenge from the writer of Luke-Acts. Draw us closer to you and each other, fueling us to do the hard things and creative things our faith requires. We still rejoice at the resurrection and seek inspiration through these scriptures; may your voice be heard through this messenger. Amen.

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Happy Anniversary, United Baptist! Just last year we celebrated the milestone of twenty years together since consolidation, and for some of you it seems like only a few even though it has been 21 years! You and some before you blended two sacred dwellings and a third congregation into a brand-new Body of Christ. In the months leading up to the first official worship of The United Baptist Church on April 27, 2003, you and

many others prayed and pondered a consolidation. You were pilgrims and pioneers when you joined your resources, missions, ministries, and people. The consolidation and stewardship of thriving ministries for both churches opened opportunities for others going through similar decline, like the members of National Gardens, some of whom joined First Baptist Annandale and Boulevard Baptist Churches which had become United Baptist. The potential for Christ-centered service to a community in need in Annandale and Fairfax County still exists here. Let us hear how Scripture reminds us of that.

Our short Luke passage continues Jesus' story and parable of the sower. If one has good soil, which I believe we do here, God's word (the seed Jesus talks about) will flourish and grow if you water, fertilize, and provide the right light. One could argue that the surrounding neighborhoods are not good soil for Christian development, but specifically the good soil I refer to this morning is you, your training, motivation, your hearts, and your love of God's Word. If you prefer light as your metaphor, let's use that. Having a well-lit lamp in Biblical times refers to an oil lamp with a good wick and supply of oil; and you should not hide it under a jar, vessel, basket, or bed! In Matthew's version from the Beatitudes in 5:15, he said not to hide it under a bowl, but like Luke to place it on a lampstand so it could light up the whole room and others could see! Luke's version implies a Greco-Roman home style with a courtyard to gather and many rooms; scholars believe his word choice means to spread out the light so that others might see it and be drawn to it like in a courtyard, referring perhaps to the Gentiles learning about and accepting Jesus.

Both interpretations are correct. Speaking to his disciples, as I'm speaking to you, Jesus says we are not to hide the fellowship of believers here in this church or hide our faith or service to others. We stay visible not by marketing, as in business models of church, although some of that is helpful, like having a strong website and social media, but through our visible ministries. We must be visible in our giving, teaching, preaching, community service, and leadership.

How do we accomplish that? I asked last week and at breakfast yesterday why do we worship together each week? I got wonderful answers, most of which are also in a little new book I discovered, called *Gather: Loving Your Church as You Celebrate Christ Together*, by Tony Merida. It is under New Non-fiction at several local public libraries. We gather to hear God's word, to pray together, sing together, to celebrate the Gospel in the ordinances of baptism and communion, to reach others, to encourage ourselves and each other for future service, and to stir up one another in good ways (Hebrews 10:24<sup>ESV</sup>). There may be times you or your church friends do not want to come to church, and that is human nature, but if we remember we attend also for others to see our priorities and motivation, God will bless your presence and may have an important conversation waiting for you that could bring spiritual renewal for you or for someone who's hurting that day.

In our Acts passage, I took the liberty of going out of chronological order since Easter. Pentecost for us hasn't yet occurred and will be on May 19<sup>th</sup>. But in our Scripture for our Anniversary today, Pentecost **has** happened for the disciples and these words tell us about how the early church developed after so many were saved and touched by the Holy

Spirit. The activity of the early church was disciplined: it continued through the apostles to teach the Gospel message of Jesus, to share their doctrine, to pray with and for one another, and to provide for one another by sharing their resources including food and shelter. They practiced the fellowship of believers by breaking bread together in community meals, and even selling their worldly goods to help those who had nothing (voluntarily maintaining property for the common good of all). They were devoted to one another, thanking God for their many blessings, and raised funds for charity. “The men and women in the book of Acts are ready to do whatever it might take to accomplish their mission. No work is too menial for the highest among them, and no work too daunting for the lowliest.” (*Theology of Work, Bible Gateway*) On our best days, I think that sounds like us!

This week I am introducing a prayer and action emphasis where I need your help and participation. Now, don't panic! This will be a whole church effort (I hope), but we'll approach it as a “Divine Experiment” with no expectations other than you will try your best to participate. It is both a faith exercise and a discipleship stretch. Today, you'll just hear the concept, so you can ask me questions about it. Next week, I'll have an easy chart you will keep for about 6 weeks or so that will tell you exactly what to do. There will be two names from our Directory on it: one name will be someone you probably know (maybe a regular attender), and one you have not seen here in a while. There will be several tasks listed in order. The first and most important task for the family name, address, email, phone number you receive is Prayer! That's easy, right? I'd like you to pray for them. The second task is easy too: send a note. The third

task is optional to email them. The fourth is more challenging: to visit or meet for coffee or a meal. Then you'll invite them to something, an event we have, to volunteer for the food pantry, or to come on Sunday. And finally, you'll follow up. Not everyone wants to hear from the pastor like this; some are intimidated or think I'm calling for money. It has nothing to do with stewardship!

For some of you, this may seem difficult, and that's ok. I will help you through it all. For others, it's easy and you're already doing it! The purpose is for you to help me gather updated information and to reach out gently to some we haven't seen in a long time. Another purpose is for you to learn something about yourself and being a "minister" or missionary. You will **not** be graded! You will **NOT** be judged by the results. Hear me! God is doing the work already behind the scenes, especially if you start with prayer. This exercise will help me develop a process for the future as I welcome visitors. Now some of you may resist doing God's work in this way, and we can talk about that one on one. This is **NOT** some gimmick; I know that it works, because I have done it and experienced spiritual growth and confidence. You will **not** be discussing theology or Scripture. It's simply fellowship and hospitality presented in a systematic method. And you all are excellent in those spiritual gifts. If you feel anxious, just give your anxiety back to God, and pray this week to open your heart about participating. God is blessing our 21 years together, and you are one of the reasons! How we hear another's love and concern determines how we share the good news and how we can grow this church. There is beauty in legacy, unity, and in Christian relationship.

Let us truly become united as our name states. Happy Anniversary!

Amen. ||

**Let us pray.** Dear Lord, we thank you for the legacy of this church, the early church fellowship, their commitment, and the wisdom of your scriptures. We are grateful for those who came before us and for those who will come after us. Help us to be courageous when we reconnect with others; let us project your love not judgment or fear. Help us to feel joy in all our personal interactions either through prayer, notes, telephone or in person. Bless our efforts to love the people of this church and mission center as we celebrate your work here and prepare for new work. We pray in Jesus' name, **Amen.**