

06.23.24 ~ Pentecost 5
“Baptists Are Better Together!”
The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Ecclesiastes 4:8-12 (NIV)

⁸ There was a man all alone;
 he had neither son nor brother.
There was no end to his toil,
 yet his eyes were not content with his wealth.
“For whom am I toiling,” he asked,
 “and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?”
This too is meaningless—
 a miserable business!

⁹ Two are better than one,
 because they have a good return for their labor:
¹⁰ If either of them falls down,
 one can help the other up.
But pity anyone who falls
 and has no one to help them up.
¹¹ Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm.
 But how can one keep warm alone?
¹² Though one may be overpowered,
 two can defend themselves.
A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

Leader: These Are God’s Words of Wisdom.
All: Thanks be to God!

Philippians 4:8-9 (The Message)

⁸⁻⁹ You’ll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse. Put into practice what you learned from me, what you heard and saw and realized. Do that, and God, who makes everything work together, will work you into his most excellent harmonies.

Leader: These Are God’s Instructive Words through Jesus and Paul!
All: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Gracious God, we thank you for this full week of travel preparation, food mission restocking and distribution, learnings, celebrating with other like-minded Baptists, seeing ministry peers and making new friends, and many moments of pastoral care for others. We thank you too for the leadership and collaborative work of this church and the collection of churches with whom we support, do missions, and enjoy Christian fellowship. We ask you to continue to bless their work, leadership and collaboration to spread the Gospel near, far, and wide. Open these Scriptures to

enlighten us and motivate us to reimagine the universal church's influence in our world, and my reflections be your voice heard today. Amen.

Well, I'm back, and I bring you greetings from my peers, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship staff, CBF partners and many new friends. It was a much larger conference than I expected, and frankly a bit overwhelming in a good way. I have not had time to put together a photo collage, but if you're not on Facebook where I posted many photos, I'll be putting a few in the Vision newsletter that comes out next week. Suffice it to say there were thousands of like-minded, yet age-, race-, and ethnicity-diverse attendees. Many peers from the Mid-Atlantic CBF and the Virginia and National Baptist Women In Ministry were present and engaged. One of my goals was to learn more about this organization we support, and that was indeed successful and beneficial. Another goal was to "network" and build or renew connections that might be helpful to our growth and development. A third goal was to **change** what I sometimes hear our narrative story to be from "woe is me, our small little church is really struggling" to "wow, look what we can do and are doing in our community, with God's help!" Also, mission accomplished.

So, today's sermon is more of a motivational report or testimony of some amazing and hopeful things God is doing around the world and in our national realm of churches. Organizations like Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty were there, eight prominent seminaries, Judson Press, CBF Latino Network, Bread for the World, Center for Congregational Health, and many more. There were worship opportunities with amazing preaching, prayers (including a prayer quilt), tasteful praise bands, a children's and adult choir, and even a mambo

band with people dancing in the aisles. Imagine Baptists praising God's goodness through movement! Folks, I think that will be what heaven's all about – many expressions of worship, languages, and creative beauty. Let it be known that there was some fundraising and a silent auction with art, jewelry, and digital technology (folks I learned how to do a QR code, which I can teach you if you'd like). There were big conversations about calling, and small conversations about faith and the church's future. It is time for us to embrace and reimagine this vision of God's work in the world! Using Jeremiah's encouragement to those exiled (Jeremiah 29:4-14), and Paul's advice to the Philippians (our own theme verse this year! Philippians 4:4-9), CBF reminded us that God is on the move despite what you hear about church decline. These words were our instructions for the conference; maybe you'll find inspiration and affirmation in them as I did:

This re:imagination is not one we approach alone, as the Holy Spirit moves among us, stirring up our holy imaginations and allowing sparks of innovation in our communities and ministries . . . consider the ways in which God is shaping and transforming your life as you share stories from your context and hear the ways in which others have been experiencing transformation in a post-pandemic world by **asking new questions, embracing new ways of serving, imagining new ministries, setting aside old fears and rediscovering the incredible gifts they have been given to serve their communities.**

See, it is not just your pastor who is seeking the wisdom of God to try new things! Someone even wrote a new hymn for this year's event, which we'll teach over the summer.

Now, hear remarks from The Rev. Dr. Paul Baxley, Executive Coordinator of CBF:

We live in communities marked by difference, division, and pulverizing polarization. Diversity in our denominational life and in our congregational life has become more and more pronounced as the theological and political diversity that has been among us from the beginning has expanded to include geographical, generational, ethnic and racial diversity as God has brought us toward the present . . .

Embracing diversity is a radically countercultural calling in a world torn by this fear, hatred, anger and violence, and in which the all-too-common response is to retreat into bubbles of homogeneity where difference is treated as an existential threat . . . What happens more and more and more is that people find themselves retreating into the safe and friendly confines of echo chambers where people already look like them, pray like them, believe like them, talk like them, walk like them, agree with them, and tell us all how wonderful we are and how wrong everyone else is. While that pattern certainly describes the culture and influences such as cable news and social media, it increasingly defines congregational and denominational life in the U.S.

That is not God, however! He is a redemptive God and is doing a new thing in this world and the church, and yes, it may be uncomfortable, but we are Baptists! And we are used to being independent resisters. Our distinctive doctrines of religious liberty, respect for fellow humans, autonomy of each congregation, soul freedom, and priesthood of all believers are the foundations of our denomination and will support us in this time of disagreements (referring to recent SBC divisions).

Our Juneteenth proclaimer was Rev. Dr. Zina Jacque of the historic Alfred Street Baptist Church in Alexandria, Va. She reminded us, “Like the Hebrews in Exodus 14:22 (crossing of the Red Sea) and the original audience (of newly freed slaves) gathered in Galveston, we (Baptists) sometimes feel trapped by the circumstances of our context, with nowhere to go . . . and sometimes the only option is no way out but *through* . . . God has made us a *through* people.”

The Ecclesiastes passage is Solomon's response to his earlier questions of why are we here, anyway? To toil, to spend, to seek pleasure? They are all vanities. But despite his loneliness (even though he had over 600 concubines) the original wisdom of God breaks in to help him see that two are better than one, and more are better for God's kingdom than none. That is one premise of the foundations of Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, not that all would ever agree on every facet of doctrine or practice, but that we could learn from one another and strengthen each other through our faith and cultures, becoming that cord of three strands that is stronger than one. Isn't that how we feel as church families? I witnessed it again yesterday at the Food Mission. It was affirming to see volunteers from all three of our churches and beyond working together to meet community needs. There was a new need for soap and toothpaste, and guess what? We had blessing bags to distribute (by the way, we need more supplies!). The strengths and spiritual gifts of each church contribute to Christian service.

I took a workshop that helped me learn more about our national problem of food deserts, unhealthy, cheap food that divides us economically and creates health risks, and farmers' struggles with commerce and ability to pay a fair wage to workers. I took a fantastic collaborative workshop on creative worship ideas from a practitioner at Mercer University, educated at McAfee Seminary. And I took a workshop by a Senior Pastor in Brooklyn who is remissioning his centuries old urban church, and discovered we are doing a lot of things he is! And he is gradually seeing results after a little discomfort!

We will be stronger because of these who are in fellowship and because of you. The CBF 2024 theme of re:imagine used the same Scripture as our theme, just from a different translation. That was God's affirmation to me of our path, and I hope to you, too. We must keep our eyes on the good, the lovely, pure, praising God in all things (there is no value in cursing people or situations!), and noticing the gracious and merciful results. God is weaving them all together to transform us and this world into a better place with harmony, love and beauty. How? Through relationships and belief. Those Israelites feared crossing that sea but did it anyway and God blessed them through and in their fear. God rewarded their courage and their vision of a new land; he will reward our vision of a new type of church, one that is active and vibrant, serving others as you did in the past, but in a new way. Join my own transformation that is happening daily; we are stronger as Baptists together than apart. And church may not be just on Sundays! And all of God's people say, Amen! ||

Let us pray. Dear Lord, we thank you today for this energy and affirmation. Although newness and change frighten us, they also strengthen us as your disciples. Help us to remember the lessons we've learned in our past and open our hearts and minds to new ideas and ways to reach people for salvation. Let us thank you for the beauty and the hard stuff, and especially for sending your son, Jesus. We ask you to embolden us today and every day to be through people as we answer your call. Thank you, Jesus, for it is in your name we pray, **Amen.**