

“175 years of ‘But Not So With Us!’”

Lewinsville Presbyterian Church

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We can only imagine what it would have been like, trying to follow the path of Jesus, despite being a combination of amazed and terrified, figuring out what it means to stake one’s life on the words of someone who keeps focusing on his death: being mocked and spit upon, and killed and then how he will rise. Staying together as disciples despite all the human temptations of wanting greater security and individual assurances, things that could fray their fellowship. Bolding drinking and sharing cups of salvation and baptizing in Jesus’ name, recentering on Jesus for discipleship when the pulls of the world, power and success, challenge their unique calling as servants of all. Reclaiming Jesus empowering words to their community “but it is not so among you!”

As this is Anniversary Sunday, perhaps you have guessed that I am not referring to the disciples of Jesus who actually first heard these words of his, but instead to the experience of disciples of the past 175 years of Lewinsville Presbyterian Church who have heard Jesus say “but not so with you” and responded “but not so with us” ever since the day on October 17th, 1846 precisely 175 years ago when this church was officially chartered by the Presbytery of Winchester. (All historical details come from *Pilgrims and Pioneers* written by Roland McElroy.)

Three hundred twenty two elders and 40 pastors and many many thousands of members later, this congregation on what was Barrett’s crossroads is still living lives that God can (from children’s sermon: pray, serve, learn and worship) proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ, joyfully worshipping the Lord, forming discipleships, celebrating sacraments, serving human need in our community and around the world, and having a pretty good time together while we do it.

There is no secret formula to our church finding itself engaged in a century and three quarters of vital ministry and mission, even completing a building renovation in a global pandemic. No secret formula to be uncovered. We’ve just

spent 175 years opening the book that Linda just read from, and looking together at what it says, and then following it to the best of our ability.

Especially scriptures like Mark 10, a mini-masterclass in how Jesus forms a community of disciples, how he draws individuals further along his path and how he shapes community around his life and Words. Sometimes Jesus is out in front leading the way, as he is in verse 32. The disciples are astonished – the Greek word that means amazed-almost terrified and then those following along, the crowds were afraid, so Jesus is out in front of a group of people who are somewhere between afraid and terrified. But where those people are, is right behind him, on the road, despite the fear.

Sometimes Jesus is taking his disciples away from the curious but not committed crowd, like in verse 33, to remind them that the path to life leads through death, and they can only do hard things together if they are not surprised by how very low it can get. And they can only do hard things together when they can trust that the risen one will raise them up. Sometimes Jesus is listening to his followers sort out how hard it is to follow him, like in verse 35, when they are tempted to want glory, or credit, or special acknowledgement – the human tendency to want to be the best, or be seen as the best, even at being a disciple. Jesus redirects and redefines what disciple means for them – one who drinks and gives the cup of salvation – the cup that will come from his blood that will be shed, and who will be baptized and will baptize – which is all about dying and rising in Christ.

Sometimes Jesus intervenes when his followers are misbehaving, as he does in verse 42. They are angry, a definition for this word in the Greek is – aggrieved in their souls – “because these ten heard that these two were whispering in his ear about getting what’s theirs - and what about what they want!” So he summons and gently reminds them that this is not who they are, *not so with you, my friends*. It works differently here with us, greatness is service and service has a cost, and part of that cost is letting go of power over and dominating others.

In just a few moves, Jesus has led, slowed down, taken aside, gently redirected, firmly corrected, listened, challenged, modeled, inspired, upended set ways, and called to great purpose. That is how Jesus led the disciples, that is how Jesus led Lewinsville for the past 175 years, that is how he leads us today and how he will still lead us, 175 years from now. (Which in case you are doing the math in your head, will be the year 2,196.)

Like the early disciples, the early LPC members knew what it meant to be afraid but to stay as close to Jesus as possible, in the years during the Civil War when the Union forces occupied the original church building and removed the walls to allow horses easier entry, and yet the building was still standing enough to be repaired and last another 90 years. That is staying close despite the fear. LPC knew they could do hard things together when they planted three churches in the span of 5 years in the 1870s, leaving their own membership at just 10 people. Sometimes you have to go low, in order to rise. LPC experienced a redirection, when they asked Rev. Harvey Dunham, serving as pastor at Western where Pastor Scott's wife Laura is pastor, to come and dissolve their church, but the furnace exploded and in the humor of the moment they saw their baptism by soot as a sign less about dying than rising again. LPC heard Jesus words, "but not so with you" anytime the temptations of the world threatened to pull at the fabric of the community, and redoubled their efforts to service with whatever they had. On Stewardship Sunday, we can focus on how they did that with their financial support, to call the first full-time pastor in 1940, nearly 100 years in to the life of the church, a few years later, to establish a Mission budget at 10% of the congregational budget – when it had previously been about \$80, to buy property and build housing, and to expand and renovate building for the current needs of the congregation and community. Service at a cost, that builds our capacity to let go, to follow the one who lets go even of his own life. All the abundant life that Jesus promises comes by way of the cross, that is how he gives it to us, and that is the only way we can receive it.

We are all part of the Lewinsville Presbyterian Church "but not so with you crew" of 2021 in the year of an ongoing celebration of 175 years. On Anniversary Sunday, we will recognize Doug McGuire, Celia and Quinn Morrison and Mary Ann Phillip who have now been part of this congregation's life for 28.6% of it. Caroline Van Waggoner, our longest member, tops out at 42.9% - note that I have never used a calculator in a sermon as much as I have today.

All our other Golden Members are somewhere between 28.6 and 42.9%. The Golden Members will be in the narthex after the service, and along with the usual celebratory remarks, maybe ask them what they have come to know about abundant life from their stewardship toward and service through this church.

Today we are grateful for our pioneers and pilgrims who founded and nurtured this church and the trial blazers who have continued the work through today. Many of you know that I love to hike and some of you know that my husband Andrew's

hobby is to create trails. Here are some things we have come to know from being out in the woods that may end up being about more than the woods:

Sometimes you find yourself not even on a trail and a little lost, and all your energy is spent in making it through and finding your way. A survival season.

And sometimes you are following a trail someone else has made, and you are grateful for an easier path and the energy someone else put in so that you have a smoother time. A coasting season.

But sometimes everything comes together for you, a season to blaze a branch or a whole new trail, to create the path and then leave the blazes – the name of the color or symbols that mark your trails for others to find. Sometimes, you see that you have everything you need for the work: that compass and sense of direction, along with good tools and resources, creativity and innovation to see what isn't there yet, eyes to consider how to further the flourishing of all the life around the path you make, solid maps of where you have been and notes about past missteps - so as not repeat them and to even to improve them as you go - perseverance when obstacles are deeper than they first appeared.

Maybe you have already guessed that I am no longer referring just to a hiking trail but describing Lewinsville Presbyterian Church in this season. It is not a survival season and it is not a coasting season, this is a trail blazing season, at the 175 years blaze mark on the path, to celebrate how much we have been able to do together and how much possibility there is for what **we** will do through the Spirit's leading.

Another official term for trail blazing is way marking. Together we follow all the marks of the way that Jesus has left for us disciples with his own life and words, and helps us to build one for those to come. In Jesus name, Amen.