

**Stewardship Sermon Series: Why I Love My Church?**  
**Sermon Title: "We Love Salem Because..."**  
**Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 100; Luke 19:1-10; Romans 3:21-26**  
**Salem United Methodist Church**  
**October 16, 2016**  
**Rev. Dr. Sue Shorb-Sterling**

We love Salem because... Each of us has our reasons. Salem means different things to different people. This small, historic church located in a small historic village has been the spiritual home for many generations. In this home we have laughed and cried. We have worshipped. We have made commitments and broken commitments. We have said "welcome" and we have said our "good-byes." In this home, we have forgiven others and we have been forgiven. We have disagreed yet found ways to be united. We have studied, grown in faith, and served in many different ways. And we have eaten a lot of food. We are really good at "breaking bread" together from fried oyster dinners to pancake breakfasts, from coffee hour to snacks at youth group. Through all these acts, we both receive God's love and share God's love.

A young couple had not been attending church, but then they had children. They thought perhaps their children should be taught about God so they went to church for the first time as a family on Christmas Eve. They told their four year old son and their two year old daughter they were going to church to celebrate Jesus' birthday. The children sat patiently in the pews throughout the entire worship service. Then as the light of Christ was passed to each person in the pew, the entire church became silent as each person's candle was lit. In the midst of this silence, these two young children simultaneously began singing, "Happy Birthday." The organist was ready to play, "Silent Night," but instead joined the singing. The minister, who was ready to give a little talk on being the light of Christ in the darkness, smiled at these two little ones who usurped the worship service. She, too, joined in the singing. After all, Christmas Eve is the celebration of Jesus' birth. Both the pastor and the musician sensed the moving of the Holy Spirit through these children. Salem is the type of church where this could happen because we are sensitive to the movement of the Holy Spirit among us.

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God that is with us always. The Greek word for Holy Spirit is "Paraclete." It means one who encourages or uplifts, one who is called to one's side. These two young children put birthday and candles together and sang "Happy Birthday" to Jesus. It seemed like the right thing to do, but it was the Holy Spirit that transformed the singing of the birthday song into a moment that touched hearts and souls, that turned it into an expression of love. When I hear people say the reason they love being part of this church is because they feel loved and accepted, my heart leaps with joy. This is what the church is to be. Robert Frost wrote, "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in." Church is to be the place where we can go, no matter where we are on life's journey, no matter what life has thrown at us, no matter what joys, concerns, or questions we have, because God will always take us in.

The word, church, comes from two Greek words, "kyriake," and "ekklesia." Kyriake which means "belonging to the Lord" and ekklesia means "assembly." So the church is literally a group of people who belong to the Lord. This is what makes a church community or a church family different from a service club or a neighborhood group. These also create community. The difference between a these groups and the church is that the church is a group of people who choose to belong to the Lord. We choose the Lord, because the Lord first chose us. The prophet Jeremiah tells us that God invites us to be in relationship with God, "I will be their God and they shall be my people." There is a phrase today that is used by leaders, "I've got people," which means these leaders have people with expertise that they can call on. God's got people, too, us, who God can call on. To prepare us for God's tasks, God promises "to put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts." Salem is a place where God's law of love is written in our hearts. We feel it. We live it. We express it. We may not all believe in Jesus the same way. We may not all have the same political views. We come from different backgrounds, different places, and different faith traditions, but Salem is a place where God's love is written in our hearts. Salem is a place where we can

love one another even if we are different. Salem is a place where we choose to accept one another, to care for one another, and to share God's love.

That is the purpose of the church. We are to be focused on building the Kingdom of God, that place where peace and love reigns. The church is located between the kingdom that Jesus proclaimed and was manifested in him, and the time when the kingdom is to be realized in its completeness at the end of time. So the church lives in this "in-between time," the time between Jesus and when he returns. We are to be both a sign pointing the way to Jesus for the world and we are to be instruments of God's love to the world. Our world today is anything but filled with love and peace. I think God knew this when the church was created. God knew that the world needed a place where people could come and receive God's love. There is a song called, "People need the Lord." Listen to some of the lyrics, "Everyday they pass me by, I can see it in their eyes. Empty people filled with care, Headed who knows where? On they go through private pain, Living fear to fear. Laughter hides their silent cries, Only Jesus hears." People need the church, too, because the church is the place we can receive this transforming love from the Lord.

When I was a child one of my favorite stories in the Bible about God's transforming love was Zacchaeus. I loved this story because Zacchaeus was a little person and I was a little person back then. If Jesus accepted Zacchaeus, then maybe Jesus would accept me. I also loved this story because Jesus went home with Zacchaeus. I wanted Jesus to come home with me. My grandmother would have cooked a huge meal for Jesus and we all would have gathered around the table to enjoy her home cooking. I loved this story, too, because Jesus knew Zacchaeus' heart. Jesus knew Zacchaeus wasn't doing the right things. I didn't always do the right things as a child either and I still don't always do the right things. Yet, Jesus still cared for Zacchaeus. Did this mean Jesus cares for me even when I don't do the right things? Another reason I loved this story was because Jesus helped Zacchaeus understand how he could right his wrongs. Could Jesus show me how to right my wrongs?

Zacchaeus had wronged many people. As a tax collector he charged them more money than they owed the Roman Empire. He not only made a living, but got rich by taking the hard earned money of the poorer folk. He harmed them. We harm each other, too, every day with our words and actions. And when we do, we are destroying the kingdom of God. There is a lot of this happening today, isn't it? The purpose of the church is to stand against the evil destruction of God's Kingdom. As people who belong to God, we are not to participate in this destruction. Instead we are to bring the transforming peace and love we receive here into the world. Jesus touched Zacchaeus in such a way that transformed him from a greedy person to one who gave generously. He promised to not only give half of his possessions to those in need but also quadrupled the repayment of those he defrauded. Jesus set things right in Zacchaeus so he could set things right to his community.

That's the business Jesus is in: setting things right. Eugene's Peterson uses this language in his interpretation of Romans. He wrote that Jesus sets things right, "not only for us, but for everyone who believes in him. For there is no difference between us and them in this." The "us and them" in this letter refers to Jews and Gentiles, but today it can refer to any group we differentiate as "us and them." Jesus' sacrifice restores all people to where God always wanted us to be, to live in God's righteousness.

And this is also what the church is to be, a place of restoration and setting things right. As we receive and are in the process of receiving God's restoration and setting things right in our lives, we are sent to take God's righteousness, peace, and love to those who have been hurt by others, to those who are hurting others, to those who suffer in silence, and to those who are seeking something that they know is absent from their lives because God's love is for everyone. We are called to offer restoration and setting things right. This builds the Kingdom of God on earth.

I don't know what the future holds for us as a nation or as a church, but what I do know is this. God is bigger than any political agenda. Jesus still sets things right. The Holy Spirit is with us always. And here at Salem, we are a place where the peace and love of God continues to grow.

