

New Beginnings: A Time to Be Bold
Ecclesiastes 3:1-8
Matthew 5:13-16, 6:19-21, 25-33

Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green
June 14, 2015

Who are you? What do you love? What are you good at doing? Go for it!

This is the season for graduation speeches, and a lot of them sound basically the same. Follow your dreams. Make a difference. Change the world. Go for it!

I guess you could say that today's sermon is a "graduation sermon." For those of you who have been participating in the New Beginnings Small Group Meetings, congratulations! After tonight, you'll be done! And you deserve a diploma!

You'll have met six times over an eight week period and first I want to say, *thank you*. The entire congregation will benefit enormously from your participation in this process which will set a new direction for our future at the Church on the Green.

Those of you who did not attend the Small Group Meetings have also been participating through your presence here on Sunday mornings and your attention to my series of sermons on the subject of New Beginnings. I've never preached on a single theme for nine weeks running—ever—and I feel like there ought to be a box of trophies for me to hand out to all of you for your heroic work of listening. Thank you for staying on board with this larger conversation about where God is leading us as a faith community.

Who are you? What do you love? What are you good at doing? A good portion of the New Beginnings process has been designed to help us answer those questions.

God has a purpose for us in this community at this time in the history of the changing world, and, chances are, that purpose will align nicely with who-we-are and what-we-love and what-we're-already-pretty-good-at!

I have a personal theological opinion (that meshes nicely with the New Beginnings approach) that I've held for quite some time that goes like this: God doesn't call us to do what we hate and what we're bad at. Rather, God calls us to do what we love and what we have a particular talent for doing.

That doesn't mean we'll never have to do stuff that we hate or that we're bad at. I hate and am bad at paper work and guess what? I still have to do—paper work. But my larger calling centers around my passions and my gifts for pastoral ministry. I love it. I'm pretty good at it. It's me.

The New Beginnings process applies this insight beyond individuals to the community. Who are **we**? What do **we** love? What are **we** good at? The New Beginnings process invites us to home in on those qualities, to look there for clues as to what God needs and wants from us for the next chapter of our ministry.

We're not a large enough church to try to be all things to all people in Bloomfield. You might say it's time for us to specialize. It's time for us to say—we're going to do... X! We're going to do X! because we love it, we're good at it, and God needs X from us. And in order to do X, we're going to have to not do Y, Z and Q that we *used to do*.

By specializing we can concentrate our energies around our particular calling. By specializing we can all be tending one fire so to speak.

In the selections from the Sermon on the Mount that I chose for our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus says "You are the Light of the World" and "You are the salt of the earth." He is saying make a difference! Be known! Be a visible and meaningful and influential presence in the world around you.

And it is worth noting that the "You" in these verses, both times, is plural not singular. "You are the light of the world" is not a personal, individual, self-help message but a description of the Christian community. If it were a personal message, we'd all be competing with each other for a position for our personal lanterns on the tops of the best hills, so that our personal lights will outshine others'.

But it's *not* a personal message. It's a sermon to a community: "let your collective, communal, corporate light shine before all people." It's an invitation to work together as one body, so that our collective witness to God's love revealed in Jesus Christ will be vivid, bright, unmistakable, irresistible!!! It's an invitation to tend one fire together...

The second metaphor is like the first: You (collectively) are "salt for the earth." You—the church—are not here for yourselves or even for each other. Your focus is to be outward. You are salt for the earth. Your purpose is to add the essential ingredient to what is being cooked up by others.

We are at a turning point in the history of the Church on the Green. Rather, I should say, we have chosen to be at a turning point in the history of the Church on the Green. We didn't have to do the New Beginnings Process. We chose to do it.

And that has led us to look in the mirror like we've never looked in the mirror before. We can't "unsee" the charts that show our membership decline from 1300 in the 1960s to 180 members today. We can't "unsee" the graphs that show what small percentage of our campus and our buildings we actually utilize for a congregation of our size. We can't "unsee" the demographic information that helps us to understand how our town is changing and will continue to change in the near future.

I chose Ecclesiastes 3 as our Old Testament reading today *not because it tells us what to do but because it shows us what questions to ask.*

“There is a time for every purpose under heaven,” the writer states. “A time to be born and a time to die... A time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted... A time to mourn and time to dance.” The question this passage asks, and that I ask you, is, **What time is *this time*?**

If there is “a time to tear and a time to sew”, a time “to keep and a time to lose,” what shall we tear? And what shall we sew? What shall we keep? And what shall we lose?

Our sanctuary needs north of \$5 million in repairs to reopen. If our sanctuary needed no work at all, if it was open today, if we were sitting in there right now instead of here in the Parish House, and if we were doing the New Beginnings process, the sanctuary would still be ten times larger than we need it to be, *and we would very likely be asking ourselves whether a smaller space would be warmer and more conducive to membership growth.*

There. I said it. The sanctuary with its magnificent, new, 3-manual 48-rank French Romantic Peragallo pipe organ is ten times larger than we need it to be, and our worship attendance would have to quadruple for that space to begin to be the right size for us again.

I don't have the answers but I do believe I have the right questions. What shall we plant? And what shall we pluck up? What shall we embrace? And what shall we refrain from embracing?

To help think about these questions from a different angle, here is a story, a parable, actually.

It was written by the 19th century Danish philosopher, theologian and poet Soren Kierkegaard.

It is part of the reading material for the last session of the New Beginnings Small Groups,

so you will hear it again this evening. As you listen to this brief story, imagine how it might apply to our congregation.

A certain flock of geese lived together in a barnyard with high walls around it. Because the corn was good and the barnyard was secure, these geese would never take a risk.

One day a philosopher goose came among them. He was a very good philosopher and every week they listened quietly and attentively to his learned discourses.

“My fellow travelers on the way of life,” he would say, “can you seriously imagine that this barnyard, with great high walls around it, is all there is to existence? I tell you there is another and a greater world outside, a world of which we are only dimly aware. Our forefathers knew of this outside world. For did they not stretch their wings and fly across

the trackless wastes of desert and ocean, of green valley and wooded hill? But alas, here we remain in this barnyard, our wings folded and tucked into our sides, as we are content to puddle in the mud, never lifting our eyes to the heavens which should be our home.”

The geese thought this was very fine lecturing. “How poetical,” they thought. “How profound! What a flawless summary of the mystery of existence.”

Often the philosopher spoke of the advantage of flight, calling on the geese to be what they were. After all, they had wings, he pointed out. “What were wings for, but to fly with?”

Often he reflected on the beauty and the wonder of life outside the barnyard, and the freedom of the skies. And every week the geese were uplifted, inspired, moved by the philosopher’s message. They hung on his every word. They devoted hours, weeks months to the study of his doctrines...

All this they did. But one thing they never did. They did not fly. For the corn was good, and the barnyard was secure.¹”

We have a 50th anniversary year coming up in 2016. 2016 will be the 50th anniversary of the merger Old First with three other area churches and our chartering as “The Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green.” I can’t think of a better way to prepare for our 50th anniversary year than by doing the hard work that we are doing now, to discern, choose and plan for our future mission and ministry.

This is a not a time to tinker around the edges. This is not a time to keep doing what we’ve always done and keep expecting different results. This, I believe, is a time to be bold.

In the graduation speeches they always say things like: Follow your dreams. Make a difference. Change the world. Go for it!

I say those things, but not with empty optimism. I say those things grounded in the ancient promises of our faithful God. Let’s follow our dreams. Let’s make a difference. Let’s change the world around us in Christlike ways. Let’s go for it!

Because, remember, Jesus said: “Do not worry... Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear... But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matthew 6:33)

Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. And all these things shall be added unto you. Allelu, Alleluia!

To the glory of God. Amen.

~*Ruth L. Boling*

¹Kierkegaard, Soren. Translated by Athol Gill, in Fringes of Freedom, Lancer: 1990.