

“What a Difference a 150 Years Can Make!”

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What a glorious day it is at First Congregational Church of Los Angeles. Thank you to all our guests for sharing this day. Thank you to all the staff and congregational leaders who have worked so hard for this day. And thank you to all our members and friends who are with us. You make such a difference.

Even though this is a momentous day in the life of our church and city, I'm remembering a quote by G.K. Chesterton who said, "Angels can fly because they take themselves lightly." And so I celebrate the joy and laughter and faces of young people in our congregation today. And the graduating class of Pilgrim School . . . we are so proud of you and excited for your future.

Oh, how the world has changed over the past 150 years! That's true for this great city of Los Angeles, a city that is constantly morphing and changing and becoming something new, but it's also true for churches all around the country.

There was a time when churches were at the center of American culture. Generations of families attended churches. And they didn't just attend every now and then, they attended week after week, and they served on committees, and they taught Sunday School classes, and they gave of their financial resources, and they built buildings like this, a beautiful Gothic Cathedral that was built during the Great Depression, and they started institutions like hospitals and schools, like our wonderful Pilgrim School.

None of it was an accident. It happened because people of faith believed a church could make a difference in the life of a city. And here we are now . . . on our 150th anniversary . . . and while we celebrate our history today, I'm ready to point us toward our future. Churches are no longer at the center of American cultural life. That is a huge change. But frankly, that's just fine with me, because that means we now have to work hard for our relevance in the lives of people.

In the earliest days of the ancient Church, that we especially remember on this Pentecost Sunday, the Church was on the margins of the Roman Empire, and yet it grew and multiplied and made a difference in the world. And that's why we're here today and that's why we'll be here tomorrow . . . we're here to make a difference in the lives of people!

Over the past decades two major forces have shaped the American landscape when it comes to churches . . . the first is the rise of more conservative, Evangelical type of churches. These churches tend to interpret the Bible in a more literal way, a narrow way, and they really offer an answer-oriented faith to the world.

Many of these communities are mega-churches, often built around the personality of a charismatic leader. And while I want to respect the religious beliefs of others, I have to say that in many ways the religious right has slowly co-opted the Christian faith in America.

To the point that to be “Christian” – in the minds of many – has come to mean being anti-intellectual or philosophically soft. Or to be “Christian” has come to mean being intolerant toward world religions and people of different sexual orientations and demeaning of women. Or to be “Christian” has come to mean being anti-science, anti-evolution, in fact anti-social sciences all together.

But here we are on our 150th anniversary and I think it’s time for our church to stand up and say: “There is another way of being Christian!” That’s why we’re here now. We’re not here merely to keep the building standing. We’re not here merely to keep the organ playing. We’re not here to merely keep the lights on.

We’re here to make a difference in our city, and to say to people who have been burned by religion, shamed by religion in the name of God, hurt by communities of faith because of injustice, we’re here to say that you can bring your head and heart into this congregation every Sunday morning, and you can bring your differences into this church, and you can bring your deepest questions about life into this church, because we’re here to open our doors as wide as God’s heart.

In many ways, our church is an alternative . . . we’re here to say that there’s a way to be a Christian, and still believe in science and evolution and academic research. And there’s a way to be a Christian, and still love gay people and straight people and transgendered people. There’s a way to be a Christian, and still respect Muslims and Jews and Buddhists and Hindus. There’s a way to be a Christian, and love the immigrants and refugees of the world. And there’s a way to be a Christian and believe, really believe, that climate change is the great moral issue of our time.

But we’re also here as an alternative to the secularism of our age. I don’t mean secularism as science or reason. I’m talking about the view of life that suggests the only reality in our human experience is the reality that we can scientifically prove and empirically demonstrate. We’re here to say that there is more to life than meets the eye.

After he passed away several years ago, the great French theologian and scientist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, wrote a note on a scrap of paper, and someone found it on his desk. It read: “There is something afoot in the universe.” Or as Shakespeare wrote, “There are more things in heaven and earth than what we even dreamed.”

Look, I know “God” is not a literal being sitting on a throne up in the sky. I know God is not up in the air sending down lightning bolts and causing car wrecks and afflicting people with diseases. Of course not!

God is the word we use to point us toward the depths of our human experience. God is mystery. God is poetry. God is art and beauty and music. God is that feeling we have when we look into the eyes of another human being, and not only do we see them, we begin to discover ourselves. God is that feeling we have when people know us and still love us. God is that feeling we have when we’ve made a mistake and someone has the grace to forgive us.

God is that feeling we have when we see the sparkling Pacific Ocean or the soaring Sierra Mountains of California, and for a minute, a brief and wondrous minute, we feel at home in the universe. That’s God! And God is that presence that rises up to the surface of our dark and lonely hearts, and just

when we need to hear it the most, God whispers, "It's okay. Take a breath. I love you just the way you are." That's the God of the Christian faith, and that's what we offer to people in Los Angeles today.

Now, I can't prove any of that. But I know within my experience that God, defined this way, is the deepest truth of all. And so we try to keep a light on in our church, and we are here to say to the city of Los Angeles . . . there's more to life than literal, simplistic, narrow, judgmental, shaming Christianity.

And we also try to say that there's more to life than a career and money and sitting in Los Angeles traffic. Between the emptiness of secularism and the simplistic answers of right-wing religion, there is another way. And we're trying to live it here. And we're trying to share it here. It's our purpose.

Now, I want to pull all of this together by noting there are really two big anniversaries this week. This morning is all about First Church 150, but this past week was the 50th anniversary of the Beatles releasing the Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band album, and I've been thinking about how these two anniversaries might connect to one another.

One song on the album, "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds," offers a visionary view of life, if not a mind-altering understanding of divine consciousness and inner spiritual renewal, even as "We picture ourselves, in a boat on a river, with tangerine tress and marmalade skies." I like that. I can dig that.

I also thought that maybe, just maybe the song "Getting Better" could become a mantra of hope for our church and city, as it says, "You have to admit it's getting better. A little better all the time." I like that a lot too.

There's a mystical song on the album titled "Within You Without You," and it says "We were talking about the love we all could share, when we find it, we try our best to hold it there, with our love, with our love, we could save the world, if we only knew, if we only knew." Now, that's groovy. And it also sounds a lot like Jesus.

But there's another song I love titled: "With a Little Help From My Friends." It's how a church holds together. With a little help from friends. It's how a senior class holds together. With a little help from friends. It's how families hold together. With a little help from our friends.

*So I wonder . . .
What would you think if I sang out of tune?
Would you stand up and walk out on me?
Lend me your ear and I'll preach you a sermon,
And I'll try not to preach out of key.
Oh, I get by with a little help from my friends . . .*

And that's why we've been here for 150 years. We get by with a little help from our friends. That's church. And it's how we'll be here for another 150 years too. It's with a little help from our friends. And so with gratitude for our past and enthusiasm for our future, I say to you on this anniversary Sunday . . . Friends, I love you all. Let's love one another. Amen.