

Newsletter article

Dear friends,

Over the last several months, we have been blessed with a significant number of new members who have decided to make First Presbyterian Church their spiritual home. Here, they have claimed, is where they want to grow in their own faith and knowledge of God. Here they join with others each week to hear of God's enormous capacity to love *all* people. Here together we prepare our hearts to enter the week and to bear the light of Christ's love to the world. These new members have ranged in age from children, youth, and young adults, to working singles and couples, to folks enjoying their retirement years. They come from different racial and cultural backgrounds and have different sexual orientations. Some have grown up in the Presbyterian Church, while others have church histories that include the United Methodist, Roman Catholic, and non-denominational churches and some have had seasons away from the church. They are from Durham, Africa, Korea, Chicago, California, Pittsburgh, Mexico, and Texas. What was it that brought these and those who will join next week and in March to First Presbyterian Church?

To be sure, people join the community of faith at FPC for many and varied reasons, but I would like to mention a few reasons why our members have made this place their spiritual home either over the past month or for many years or even decades.

- 1) **The longing for God** – Most of us cannot describe what this feels like. We simply know it as an ache, a missing piece in our soul, a hole in our hearts. We long for God in a way we have never longed for anything else. We often try to ease that ache or fill that hole with other things, with substances or habits that become addictions, with sex, with work, or even with family or friends. But try as we might, without God, the holes in our hearts remains and we continue to search for that which will complete us. Sometimes this longing for God leads us to the church where the gathered community prays, studies, and sings together. The church is imperfect, of course, and can itself become something we use to fill our empty spiritual hole. But the desire of the church is to be the Body of Christ and to point people to God where they might grow in their understanding of God's love and where they might grow in their love for all God's people.
- 2) **The desire to follow Jesus** – In John 13, Jesus washes his disciples' feet in an act of love and servanthood. He tells them, "I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." A few verses later he says, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." In our country, in our world, people have divided themselves into factions. Those who claim to follow Jesus do not love one another in the way Jesus loves us. We put conditions on our love, as in "I will love you if you do that, if you say this, if you believe that." Many people who come to FPC see the rifts between people, races, cultures, genders, and the like and long for peace and justice. They

believe that Jesus did not teach us to live with hatred and fear of one another but in love and joy, peace and hope. People come to FPC to join with others who want to follow the gospel message Jesus has set before us and to love God and our neighbor with a deep abiding love that unites rather than divides.

- 3) **The desire to be known and loved** – When we come to worship in a community of faith, we want to know that we are loved for who we are. We want to hear of the God who created us and loves us despite our imperfections. We want to belong to a community that will welcome us in the way God welcomes us and will want to know us and be in relationship with us. Writes Frederick Buechner:

We are above all things loved – that is the good news of the gospel – and loved not just the way we turn up on Sundays in our best clothes and on our best behavior and with our best feet forward, but loved as we alone know ourselves to be, the weakest and the shabbiest of who we are along with the strongest and the gladdest. To come together as people who believe that just maybe this gospel is actually true should be to come together like people who have just won the Irish Sweepstakes. It should have us throwing our arms around each other like people who have just discovered that every single man and women in those pews is not just another familiar or unfamiliar face but it our long-lost brother and our long-lost sister because despite the fact that we have all walked in different gardens and knelt at different graves, we have all, humanly speaking, come from the same place and are heading to the same blessed mystery that awaits us all.

We come to FPC with a longing to know and be known, and to be a part of a community of imperfect people celebrating together the best news they have ever heard.

- 4) **The desire to make a difference in the world** – The prophet Micah knows that any worship, any study, any ritual means nothing without justice, kindness, mercy, and humility. We are called to see the image of God in everyone we meet. We are called to feed the hungry, serve the poor, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit those in prison. We are called to work to abolish systems of injustice and racism that keep certain peoples oppressed. We are called to work for peace when the world calls for war. We are called to forgive and to accept forgiveness when the world cries out for vengeance. We are called to listen to one another in love and to be honest and authentic in return. We are called to hope for a better world and to trust that God will guide us and lead us as we seek to follow Jesus and to live into God's Kingdom and the Beloved Community. People come to FPC to join with others who are doing all these things, however imperfectly, because they love God and want to share that inclusive, unconditional love with the world and all those who live in it.

There are other reasons, of course, but these are some that came to mind when I thought of our recent new members and those who plan to join in the near future. So, in light of all this, whether you are a new member or a long-time member, **what is it that brought you to FPC? What is it that keeps you here? What in your heart seeks a depth of relationship with God and one another? How do you understand God's**

unconditional love for you? In what ways are you sharing that kind of love with the world?

I would love to know. Call me. We'll have coffee. I can't wait.

Thanks to all of you for being a part of this imperfect and yet beautiful community of faith. Know that you are loved and be at peace.

With love,
Mindy